



KOKORO CONNECT

PRECIOUS

TIME

Sadanatsu Anda







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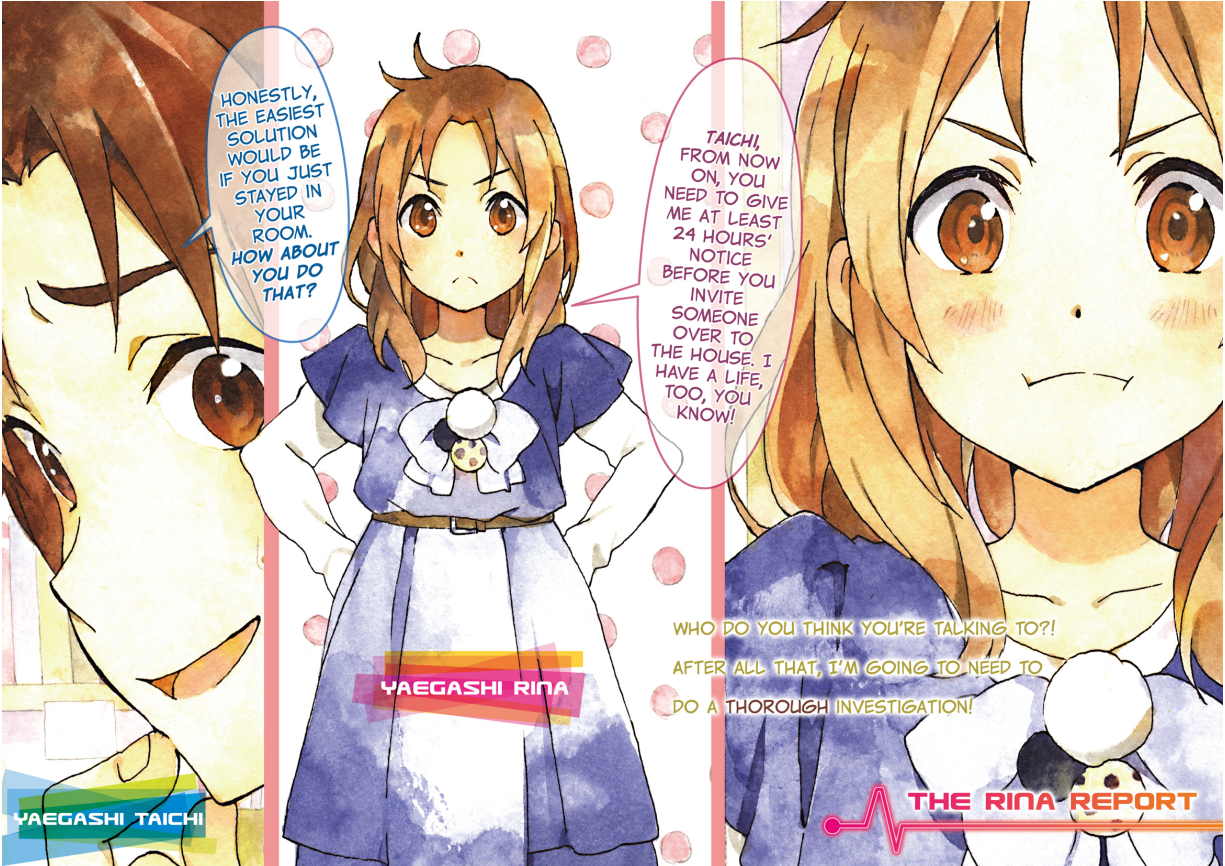
CHAPTER 1: THE RINA REPORT

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ROYALE

CHAPTER 3: FLY HIGH, NEW KID!

CHAPTER 4: THE REST OF OUR
LIVES





HONESTLY,
THE EASIEST
SOLUTION
WOULD BE
IF YOU JUST
STAYED IN
YOUR
ROOM.
HOW ABOUT
YOU DO
THAT?

TAICHI,
FROM NOW
ON, YOU
NEED TO GIVE
ME AT LEAST
24 HOURS!
NOTICE
BEFORE YOU
INVITE
SOMEONE
OVER TO
THE HOUSE. I
HAVE A LIFE,
TOO, YOU
KNOW!

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU'RE TALKING TO?!
AFTER ALL THAT, I'M GOING TO NEED TO
DO A THOROUGH INVESTIGATION!

YAEGASHI RINA

YAEGASHI TAICHI

THE RINA REPORT

"IF YOU
DON'T HAVE A
PARTNER,
WOULD YOU
WANNA... I MEAN...
WE SHOULD
TEAM UP!"

FUJISHIMA MAIKO

"F-F-
**FUJISHIMA-
SAN!**"

WATASE SHINGO

I NEEDED TO FIND A
PARTNER, AND QUICKLY.
BUT WHO? IDEALLY I
WANTED SOMEONE WHO
WOULD BOLSTER MY
OWN CHANCES OF
WINNING...



"WHAT DO WE DO? WHATEVER WE WANT!"

"WHAT EXACTLY DOES THE CRC DO?"

CULTURAL RESEARCH CLUB PRESIDENT
UWA CHIHIRO

CULTURAL RESEARCH CLUB VICE PRESIDENT
ENJOUJI SHINO

FLY HIGH, NEW KID!

I COULDN'T
CHANGE THE PAST,
AND I COULDN'T
KNOW THE FUTURE,
BUT I COULD
MAKE EACH
MOMENT THE VERY
BEST IT COULD BE.

IT WAS MY
FRIENDS WHO
GAVE ME THIS
PERSPECTIVE ON
LIFE, AND RIGHT
NOW, THERE WAS
ONE THING I
WANTED TO SAY
TO THEM:

WITH ALL MY LOVE
AND GRATITUDE,
FROM THE VERY
BOTTOM OF MY
HEART—

KOKOROCONNECT CHARACTERS



Inaba Himeko

Vice president of the Cultural Research Club, but basically runs everything. Her more feminine side is reserved for her boyfriend Taichi.



Nagase Iori

President of the Cultural Research Club. Considered the prettiest girl in school, but she doesn't let it go to her head, so she has a lot of friends. Lives alone with her mother.



Yaegashi Taichi

Cultural Research Club member. Hardworking and honest to a fault with the tendency to make sacrifices for others. Loves pro wrestling and his little sister.



Enjouji Shino

Cultural Research Club member. Small and cute like a woodland creature, but can make vicious comments without meaning to. Loves Taichi's voice.



Aoki Yoshifumi

Cultural Research Club member. His motto: "Anything goes as long as it's fun!" Resident joker of the club. In a relationship with Yui.



Kiriya Yui

Cultural Research Club member. Obsessed with all things cute and girly. Until recently, she was hailed as a child prodigy of full contact karate.



Gotou Ryuzen

Supervisor and original founder of the Cultural Research Club. His down-to-earth personality wins points with the students, who call him "Gossan."



Fujishima Maiko

Member of the Student Council Outreach Committee. Shares a class with Taichi. During their first year, she was their charismatic class president.



Uwa Chihiro

Cultural Research Club member. Shares a class with Shino and attends the same karate dojo as Yui. Has an aloof personality, but has mellowed out somewhat since joining the CRC.



Oosawa Misaki

An androgynous girl on the track team. She once confessed her love to Yui, but remains good friends with her.



Kurihara Yukina

A stylish girl on the track team. Shares a class with Taichi and is best friends with Yui. Loves to harp on and on about romance.



Katori Jouji

Student council president in charge of both the student council and the outreach committee. Smart and athletic.



Ishikawa Daiki

A baseball player in Taichi's class. In a relationship with Nakayama, but is something of a late bloomer when it comes to romance.



Nakayama Mariko

A Calligraphy Club member known for her trademark high pigtails. Best friends with Iori. Cheerful, friendly, and rowdy.



Watase Shingo

A handsome jock on the soccer team. Best friends with Taichi, with whom he shares a class. Has feelings for Fujishima.



Sone Takuya

A Manga Club member in Taichi's class. Chubby with a good-natured personality.



Shiroyama Shouto

A jazz band member nicknamed "Little Prince" due to his kindhearted nature. In a relationship with Setouchi.



Setouchi Kaoru

Used to be a bad girl, but now she's one of Iori's more level-headed friends.

Shimono Kazuhiro

Classmates with Chihiro and Shino. Generally acts like a slacker.

Tada Satoshi

Friends with Chihiro and Shino. Despite his playboy aesthetic, he cares more than he lets on.

Higashino Michiko

Classmates with Chihiro and Shino. Friendly with both guys and girls.

Oku Tomomi

Friends with Chihiro and BEST friends with Shino.



Kimura Ittetsu

Classmates with Chihiro and Shino. A tennis club member oblivious to social etiquette. Worships Taichi like a god.



Miyagami Keisuke

A Photography Club member in Taichi's class. Always chasing the latest trends in hopes of getting a girlfriend.



THE RINA REPORT



The Rina Report

"Then it's settled. Next up, we're paying a visit to Taichi's place!" Nagase declared, and the other club members all clapped.

Taichi couldn't remember who originally suggested it, but at some point the CRC decided to periodically start making "house calls" to the homes of each club member. Homes that were too small to accommodate everyone were disqualified, as well as those they'd already visited a number of times, like Inaba's. Then the remaining candidates played a game of President, and since Taichi lost, his house was chosen as their first destination.

"As soon as you become President, you use your power to invade everyone's homes? Damn. Sounds like real life," Taichi snarked under his breath.

"Oh, relax. We're not *children* — we're not going to, like, mess it up or anything," Kiriya shot back.

"So having friends over is an 'invasion,' but *you* visiting *my* house is fine...?" Inaba muttered.

"Oh, I'm so excited to see what Taichi-senpai's house is like!" Enjouji gushed, her eyes sparkling. And Taichi couldn't really say no to that, now could he?

"Man, how am I gonna make this work...?"

Obviously he didn't mind them coming over, but he would sooner die than have them meet his family. This weekend his father was away on a business trip, and his mother would probably be out of the house during the day... That left his little sister, Rina, but chances were good she might go hang out with friends somewhere...

"Well, you're gonna have to figure it out, because that's the rules, bro!" Aoki shouted.

“Don’t be a sore loser, Taichi-san,” said Chihiro.

“Pretty sure you’d feel the same if you were in my shoes... Fine, whatever! Bring it on! This weekend, you’re all invited to my house!”

And so it was decided that the CRC would visit the Yaegashi residence.

+++

“I think today’s gonna be a lazy day.”

Saturday morning finds me lounging on the living room sofa in my PJs. Tomorrow I have plans to hang out with my friends, but today I don’t have anything scheduled — I have a backlog of TV shows to watch, and borrowed manga to read, and a mildly excessive amount of homework to deal with. But the biggest reason is that my boyfriend is busy with club activities this weekend. I haven’t seen him in a while... I miss him.

But it can’t hurt to take it easy every now and then. Here in the modern era, we need to consciously make time in our busy schedules for relaxation... or so they said on TV, anyway.

“Then maybe I should get my homework out of the way first... or I could put it off until later...”

Rrgh... Choices, choices...

“Oh, that reminds me. I wonder what Taichi’s plans are.”

I haven’t given him much attention lately, so maybe today is a good day to spend with him for a change. He could help me with my homework! Yeah, I like this plan. I rise to my feet and head for the stairs. If he’s in his room, I’ll just barge in there and throw my weight around.

“Huh? Taichi...?”

I can hear the *vrrrrmmmm* of the vacuum cleaner. That’s weird... Normally the only person who ever cleans the house is Mom, and yet Taichi’s the only other person at home right now. Skeptical, I decide to check... but sure enough, there he

is, vacuuming the stairs!

"You're doing chores?"

"...Huh? Did you say something?" He notices me and switches off the noisy vacuum cleaner.

"It's just weird to see you doing chores, that's all."

"I just figured I ought to do it every now and then."

"So you've finally grown up. Good job, Taichi."

He always struck me as the kind of guy who would leave all the housework to his future wife, but maybe he's turned over a new leaf. Affection meter +2!

"Well, I mean... Oh, did I forget to tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"My friends from the CRC are coming over today."

"Oh, interesting. So your friends are coming over..."

Wait... His friends... are coming... to our house? HIS FRIENDS ARE COMING TO OUR HOUSE?

"...When did you say this is happening?"

"Sometime this afternoon."

I look down at myself. Bedhead, no makeup, and lame, little-girl PJs... If anyone saw me like this, my life would be over! Ruined! Jesus, help me!

"Why didn't you TELL MEEEEEEEE?!"

Do you get off on other people's humiliation or what?!

After I eviscerate my brother with a lecture, I run into my room and set about making myself presentable. First, I get my hair wet, then style it into waves. Then I put on some mascara and check the clock, and the next thing I know, I'm out of time to eat lunch.

"Taichi, from now on, you need to give me at least 24 hours' notice before you invite someone over to the house. I have a life, too, you know!"

"Look, I'm sorry I didn't tell you all the details. But I'm pretty sure you were standing right there when I was telling Mom."

"No excuses, mister!" My brother is a lot dumber than he

looks, so I have to be firm with him.

“...Don’t you think you’re taking this a little too seriously? You don’t need to dress up for this.”

I spin in a circle, showing off my frilly, navy blue dress. How’s that, huh?!

“Your friends are coming over, Taichi! I don’t want to embarrass the family by wearing something cringey! What if they make fun of you for having an ugly sister?!”

“I really don’t think you have to worry about that...”

And yet he seems somewhat pleased to hear it. Knowing him, he’s probably enjoying my extra-special cuteness on top of my regular cuteness. Classic Taichi.

My brother doesn’t usually let his emotions show on his face, but if you pay enough attention, you can gauge his reactions. The average person probably can’t parse it, but I’m well-versed in my brother’s ways, so I can tell.

“Honestly, the easiest solution would be if you just stayed in your room. How about you do that?”

Excuse me?

“What are you talking about? Are you saying you’re *too embarrassed* to be seen with your adorable baby sister?”

“No, that’s not it. But you don’t *need* to talk to them, right?” he shrugs casually.

How dare you!

“Yes, I do! How could you even say that?!”

God, this brother of mine!

“As your sister, I have to meet all your friends so I can be aware of what kind of people you associate yourself with!”

“What are you, a helicopter mom? Nobody goes out of their way to introduce their friends to their family. And even if they did, that’s not something my *little sister* should be handling.”

“Uh, hello?! You make it sound like I’m not important or something!”

I’m your precious baby sister, you JERK!

“Your importance isn’t the issue here. This is about

whether you need to meet my friends. And the answer is no.”

“So if you get engaged, you’re not going to bring her home to meet the family, is that it?!”

My importance is MOST CERTAINLY the issue here! Who do you think you’re talking to?!

“Okay, now you’re being ridiculous. Friends and fiancées are not the same thing.”

Don’t you roll your eyes at me! You’re treating me like a little kid! God, I hate you!

“I introduce you to *my* friends all the time! But ever since you started high school, you haven’t really brought anybody over, so... Wait, which friends are these again?”

“Clubmates. From the Cultural Research Club.”

Ah, yes, this Cultural Research Club I’ve been hearing so much about! Or “CRC” for short! His club doesn’t seem to really accomplish much of anything, but there have been many times that he’s left the house in the name of “club activities.” Stupid CRC, interrupting our brother-sister time... Okay, maybe I’m getting off-track.

“Then I *really do* need to meet them, because I know they’re super important to you! I mean, isn’t it kind of ridiculous that I haven’t met them by now? You’re three-fourths of the way through your second year of high school!”

Of course, he’s shown me pictures of them in the past, and I caught a few glimpses of them during the recent Culture Festival at his school, but I’ve never actually spoken to any of them.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little too nosy? Like the time I introduced you to my girlfriend... Ugh, I don’t even want to remember...”

Ah yes, the war I waged against the woman my brother calls his girlfriend. Obviously I wasn’t going to pull any punches with her. She’s his first girlfriend, after all!

“Come to think of it, Inaba-san is in the Cultural Research Club, too... Does that mean she’s coming over today?”

He mulls over whether to admit it, then finally nods. Oho, I see. So she's coming, too. In that case, I'd better bring my A-game.

Taichi takes one look at my smile and scowls darkly at me.

"Okay, that's it. I don't want you anywhere near them! Just stay in your room, or go hang out with your friends or something!"

"Wh-Who died and made you dictator, you fascist pig?!"

"I'm not a dictator! And where the hell did you learn about fascism?!"

"In school, duh! I'm in sixth grade now, Taichi! And next year, I'll be in middle school! That means I can legally get married!"

"No, it doesn't! ...Does it?! Either way, we're getting off-topic!" He let out a big sigh. "Look, I'll introduce you real quick when they get here, but you have to promise me you'll leave us alone after that, got it?"

"No way! After all that, I'm going to need to do a thorough investigation!"

I'll grade them on their performance and write a report and everything! Then I'll call a family meeting to discuss! And I won't go easy on him! That's final!!!

"You better stay out of my business. If you hassle my friends, I'm gonna be pissed."

"In that case, I'll just make it MY business! In which case, YOU can butt out!"

Oh, YOU'RE gonna be pissed? Go right ahead! Knock yourself out!

He tries to argue with me further, but I simply ignore him.



"We're heeeere!"

"Thanks for having us!"

"P-P-Pardon the intrusion!"

I hear voices call out as the front door opens and several

people file into the house.

"For starters, I guess I'll show you to my room... Might be a bit of a tight fit with all of us, though."

"No big deal! The more, the merrier!"

"You know, Taichi, if it gets to be too cramped, we could have half of the group hang out in the living room instead."

"Ooh, classic Inaban! She knows the place inside and out!"

"I'd really rather keep this contained to my room if at all possible. I don't want you running into *her*."

Concealed inside the first-floor bathroom, I listen in on their conversation.

"Wow... He really doesn't want to include me at all..."

It's infuriating... but I decide not to approach them just yet. If I initiate things too early, my brother will only let me say a few words to them before shooing me away to my room to do my homework, and that'd throw a major wrench in my plans. Yeah, that's right, Taichi! I see right through you!

After the group heads up to the second floor, I step out to the hallway and peer up the stairs. What do I do now? Ideally I'd like to wrangle them in one by one so I can have a long, uninterrupted conversation with each of them. I could try to find the right time to take them some drinks and snacks, but I'll need to make sure my brother doesn't get in the way...

"Sorry, guys. I'll go grab some more cushions so everyone can have one. I think there's some in the linen closet... Be right back."

...Is this my big chance?!

I grab the *baumkuchen* cake from the fridge and put it on a tray. Then I dash upstairs and barge into Taichi's room.

"Knock, knock—"

"Aha! Pro wrestling DVDs! ...God, how many does he have?! There's, like, a *million*!"

"Makes me wonder how many of *those* DVDs he has... Any idea, Inaban?"

"I did some digging, but as far as I can tell, he doesn't have any."

"Hmm... Well, I can't imagine him successfully hiding them from you, so..."

"Real talk, I don't think he owns any, Iori-chan. I've lent him a few of mine, but he's never offered me anything in trade."

".....You still have that crap, Aoki?"

"This was over a year ago, Yui, dear! I already threw them away! ...I mean, I'm plannin' to! I swear!"

"I'm inside Taichi-senpai's room... One small step for me, one giant leap for mankind..."

"No it isn't. It's just a step."

"You ought to be more excited about this, Chihiro-kun! Think about it! We're in Taichi-senpai's room!"

It's sheer chaos in here. No one notices that I came in. B-But I can't give up yet!

"Huh? Ohhh! Are you the little sister we've heard so much about?!"

Then one of them, the pretty girl with the long, dark hair, points me out to the others.

"Y-Yeah, I'm Yaegashi Rina. Hello, everybody."

They all turn to look at me—one, two, three, four, five, six. Six high-schoolers I barely know, all packed into the same room with me. This is actually... kind of scary!



“Hi there! Sorry we all dropped in on you like this!” says the first girl, smiling softly. Her expression is reassuring, like a big mug of warm milk, and suddenly I’m not so scared anymore.

As the others greet me in turn, I bow to each of them.

“Here, I brought you a snack. Oh, I see you guys don’t have any drinks... Well, I guess my brother will probably handle that...”

“Hold on a minute — you’re telling me she’s in sixth grade, and she’s already this considerate?! Can me and Taichi trade sisters?!” shouts a girl with long, glossy, reddish-brown hair. Then she moves closer. “I mean, just look at her!”

Suddenly, all eyes are on me. I feel the urge to escape, but I’m trapped.

“W-Well, uh... I’ll be in the living room! I’d like to talk to each of you one-on-one, so come see me whenever you want!”

With a bow, I slip out of the room. Whew, that was close. No sign of Taichi, either — I wonder what’s taking him so long.

Back in the living room, I pour myself a glass of water.

“Whew... That was scary...”

Still, I accomplished my mission. And as a fun bonus, I managed to tell them I wanted to talk to them one-on-one.

“But this next part will be the hard part.”

Just you wait, CRC! That includes you, Taichi!



As I struggle to make progress on my stupid homework, I hear someone come down the stairs.

“Hey there!” It’s the pretty girl with the long hair. “Oh, you’re doing your homework? Right on! I’m proud of you.”

I vaguely remember this girl from the photos Taichi showed me, except she wore her hair in a ponytail.

"You're... Nagase-san, right?"

"What the?! You know my name?!" Delighted, Nagase-san beams at me. "No need to be formal, though. You can call me by my first name: Iori."

"Okay then, Iori-san it is."

"Mmmm, you're so cute!" She wiggles her fingers at me.

But in my opinion, she's the cute one. She's so radiant, she makes the sun insecure. Not only that, but...

"Your skin is *flawless*! What lotion do you use?"

"Just water!"

"*What...?!*"

I'm still in elementary school, and even I use lotion! You'd think the other girls at her school would make fun of her. But then again, with a personality like that, maybe she doesn't get bullied.

"I gotta say, you're adorable, Rina-chan. No wonder Taichi loves you so much."

"Wait, what? Does he talk about me to you guys?"

"Are you kidding? He gushes about you so much, we're all sick of hearing it by now!"

Whoa. Now there's a surprise. I'd expect my brother to conceal my existence like a shameful secret. But apparently not... Honestly, I'm happy to hear it. Heh heh heh.

"Aha. I take it the feeling is mutual."

"What?! Well, I mean... he's my brother, so obviously I love him, too..."

"Glad to hear it! Your brother-sister bond is really something special."

With a satisfied grin, she strokes my hair. Headpats from a pretty girl... I'm in heaven... Wait, what am I saying?! I still have an important mission! Focus, Rina! Now what was it I wanted to ask her again...?

"Oh, right... There was something I wanted to ask you."

"What's up?"

"Didn't you and Taichi have a crush on each other at one point?"

Suddenly, the whole room goes cold.

"Did Taichi say something to you?"

"No, no! He didn't tell me anything. I just sort of pieced it together."

"Oh, okay." She switches back to her warm smile. "Well, it's a long story. But right now, Yaegashi Taichi is in a relationship with Inaba Himeko." Her smile deepens, and I can't begin to imagine the hidden meaning behind it.

"Maybe I'll tell you more once you're older."

She's so cool and mature! My brother couldn't possibly measure up. If they dated, he'd get a big head about it and completely ruin his chances with her.

"Okay! Could we, um... trade email addresses? I'd like to ask your advice about some stuff, you know, whenever you have some time."

"Bring it, girl! But I don't have my phone on me right now. Can it wait until later?"

"O-Of course. That reminds me: What brings you downstairs, anyway?"

"Oh, crap! I was gonna use the restroom! The one upstairs is being repaired, right? Okay, I'll be right back — wait, where is it?!"

"Go out to the hallway and it'll be on the left!"

Too bad the upstairs toilet won't get fixed until tomorrow. Then again, if it wasn't for that broken toilet, Taichi's friends probably wouldn't come downstairs at all. This way I'll have plenty of chances to talk to them... Well, lucky me! This must be a sign from God that he wants me to make my report!

Subject: Nagase Iori

Beauty: S

Kindness: A

Ditziness: B

Cool Girl-ness: A

Notes: She's way too much for Taichi to handle, so she

made the right choice by not dating him. He'll need AT LEAST two years of training first.

After Iori-san returns from the restroom, she says, "I'll tell the others to come visit you!"

I call back, "Yes, please! Just don't let my brother find out!"

At this, she tilts her head in contemplation... then shrugs and says, "Alright, sounds fun."

Right as I'm thinking about changing Iori's Kindness grade from an A to an A+, I hear two people come down the stairs. That was fast.

"Let's get our snack on!" the tall guy calls out as he walks in, accompanied by another guy. "Oh, hey, Rina-chan!"

"Hey."

"Hi, guys..."

The tall one is Aoki-san, and the other one... He seems cold and aloof, but he's a total hottie.

"We just came down to get some snacks, since Taichi said they're on the table in here," Aoki-san explains. Truth be told, I've actually spoken to him before — he comes over to hang out with Taichi sometimes. I just didn't realize he was in the CRC.

"Wow. Is my brother seriously making our guests get their own snacks?"

Oh my god, do I need to rip him a new one?

"Taichi's kinda busy with something else right now. And besides, I wanted to chat with you," Aoki-san grins.

"Well, okay... In that case, can I start with him?" I point to the other guy.

"Huh? What about me?"

"I want to speak to each person one-on-one. For now, go wait your turn in the other room!"

With Aoki-san out of the way, it's time for Interview #2. Upon further inspection, I realize this guy has a sorta

feminine face. What's the word? Andro-something?

"What is this about, exactly?"

"Don't worry about it! Just have a seat."

First, we start off with a quick self-introduction, and I learn that his name is Uwa Chihiro (kind of a girly name, too, no offense). Come to think of it, I've heard Taichi mention some "new first-year members" a handful of times...

"Uwa-san, how do you feel about my brother?"

Unlike earlier, I manage to stay calm and composed. So far, so good.

"Well, uh... I respect him a decent amount, I'd say..."

Taichi's won the respect of his kouhai? I'm so proud!

"What do you respect about him in particular?"

"Uhhh... Well, he's a very generous person, I guess..."

From there, I ask a few more questions.

"How do you usually spend your weekends?"

"I go to the dojo, mostly."

"What kind of dojo?"

"Karate."

"What sort of grades do you get in school?"

"I'd say I'm probably in the top 10. Top 20 at worst."

At no point does Uwa-san seem to enjoy this conversation, and it's starting to feel like an interrogation.

"...Okay, I think that's everything I wanted to know. Thank you for your time."

"Sure, no problem... So what's this about?"

"Don't worry about it! But while I have you..."

There's something I'm curious about.

"Just bear with me for a moment."

I approach him... and press a hand to his chest.

"Wh-...?!"

Next, I touch his bicep.

"You're fairly ripped. I can tell you work out."

"I mean, I take karate pretty seriously."

Handsome face, toned body, decent grades, diligent work ethic... Oho, now here's a catch. Maybe I should keep my eye

on this one.

"Say, are you planning to get a well-paying job when you grow up?"

"What?"

Subject: Uwa Chihiro

Manliness: B+

Body Type: B+

Friendliness: D

Future Potential: A

Notes: I'm interested in him not because of his connection to Taichi, but for my own reasons. His attitude could use some work, though.

"Next!"

"What is this, a hospital...?" Uwa-san mutters as he walks out. And in his place, in came Aoki-san.

"Hey there, Rina-chan! Jeez, that took forever!"

"Sorry about that. I got lost in conversation for a while there."

"Nah, it's fine." Aoki-san flashes me a toothy grin. Honestly, it was hard not to like him. "So what are you up to in here? Whoa, what's with the notepad?!"

"No! Don't look!"

"Oh, my bad. I take it that's part of the rules for this game?"

He dons a playful smile. Hmm. I appreciate his kindness, but he's a little *too* playful. Not that I'm into dominant guys, but every now and then you need your man to get serious, you know?

I examine him carefully. Tall, lanky, with wavy hair. Yep, not my type.

"...Are you insulting me in your head right now?"

"Don't worry. I'm sure there's a girl out there for you somewhere."

There's someone for everyone... according to a shoujo

manga I read the other day.

"So how've you been, Aoki-san? Haven't seen you in a while."

"Yeah, I know! I haven't had the chance to hang out with Taichi in forever... probably cuz we both have girlfriends now."

"You have a girlfriend?! Congratulations!"

"Pffhaha! Aww, thanks!"

"I take it she's even weirder than you?"

"...Now I'm not sure I wanna tell you who it is..."

"Heehee! Oh, I'm just messing with you. You seem to enjoy being bullied, that's all."

"Y'know, I've always wondered: What is it about me that makes people think I want them to treat me like I'm stupid? Is it my face? Is that it?"

Hmmm. Apparently Aoki-san has a lot of self-reflection to do.

"By the way, Aoki-san, how are things going with you and my brother?"

I carefully steer the conversation back on topic.

"Great, great! We're best bros, man!"

Most people would hesitate to answer, but not Aoki-san. His confidence is pretty dreamy. Taichi, on the other hand — ugh, he's way too insecure!

"Anyway, yeah. Your big bro's been an awesome friend to me, and I hope it stays that way for years to come! That kinda thing."

Aoki-san bows his head politely. Now *this* was what I wanted to see from him.

"No, no!" Clearing my throat, I jump to my feet. "If anything, I really appreciate you being there for him!"

Then I bow back — at a perfect 45-degree angle.

"Heh heh! You sound like you're his mom."

"I pretty much am!"

After all, I'm *way* more mature than he is!

"Of course, of course. Well, I'm looking forward to hangin'

out with you for as long as me and Taichi are besties!”

“Same!”

I’m glad to know that Taichi has a best friend, of course, but... “Just don’t try to turn it into a bromance, okay?”

“Why would I?!”

Don’t deny it! You’d totally kiss my brother if you thought you had a chance!

Subject: Aoki Yoshifumi

Likability: A

Kindness: A

Punching Bag-ness: S

Bromance Risk: B

Notes: Seriously, don’t make this weird. I’ll have to keep an eye on them in case either of them get dumped by their girlfriends.

“Rina-chaaaaan!”

Soon I hear someone rush down the stairs, and a girl peeks into the living room with a big smile on her face, her long tawny hair swaying behind her. She seems kind of small for a high-schooler, but she’s by no means weak; she radiates energy. It’s Kiriyama Yui-san, the super-athletic karate prodigy. I know because Taichi showed me a picture of her at one point.

“I’m here to give you lots of love and attention!”

“Is that a euphemism for something?!”

“What?! No! I just want to hug a cute girl! Is that so wrong?!”

“Me? Cute?”

“Duh! You’re like, totes adorbs! I wanna take you home with me!”

“Th-Thank you...”

You’d think I’d be flattered, but instead for some reason I’m scared. Her energy is... *intense*.

“Oh, but my brother probably heard you shouting my

name just now... Do you think he'll come bother us...?"

"Yeah, I don't really get it, but he doesn't seem to want us to go near you. He was like, 'I don't recommend interacting with her, but you can say hi to her before you leave, if you insist.'"

Is he seriously talking about me like that to his friends?! I'm offended!

"But don't worry! I knew he was expecting me to try to talk to you, so I waited until he was completely distracted before I snuck out. I'd say we've got, like, fifteen minutes."

Completely distracted with what? I hope nothing weird's going on up there!

"You guys aren't doing any of *that* stuff, are you?!"

"What stuff...?"

"N-Never mind!"

Whoops. Shouldn't have said that out loud.

"That reminds me, I haven't formally introduced myself," she muses, then clears her throat. "Nice to meet you. My name's Kiriya Yui, and I'm in the same club as your big brother."

"Yaegashi Rina. It's nice to meet you, too."

We bow politely to each other.

"Heeheehee... I guess we don't really need to be *that* formal with each other, huh? Honestly, you can just call me Yui. In exchange I'll call you Rina-chan... Well, I guess I already call you that... Anyway, like, is that cool with you?"

"Sure thing."

Maybe she's more level-headed than I gave her credit for. So far, the girls of the CRC are all nice people who talk to me with respect, even though I'm just a kid. Because of that, I'm barely nervous around them at all.

"So, Yui-san, can I ask you a few things?"

"Haahh... haahh..."

"...Yui-san?"

"Haahh... Huhwha?! What's up? Sorry, I wasn't listening!"

"Oh, um, I was wondering if I could ask you about

something?”

“Oh, okay... Sure... Hnng!”

“Y-Yui-san?”

“I’m fine... You’re just so cute that... I’m having, like, an episode...”

“Huh?” What is she talking about?

“Whew! Calm down, self! I know she’s super adorbs, and we’re all alone right now, and this is my big chance, but... I can’t give in...!”

Okay, now I’m *really* worried. Why is she clutching her hair and shaking her head like she’s battling her inner demons?

I get the feeling that if she loses this fight she’s having and succumbs to her desires, things are going to get really bad for me. I think.

“Ugh... I can’t take it... She’s just so sweet and cute and perfect...”

“S-Slow down there, Yui-san! I don’t know what’s going on, but... just keep trying!”

Yui-san, Yui-san, she’s our girl! If she can’t do it — God have mercy on me!

“Nngh...?! That was... so cute... Not fair... Eeeeeeeee! Shokyuuuute!!!”

“Y-Yui-sa—!”

Out of nowhere, she bolts over to me and pulls me into a tight hug. I... I can’t escape!

Then she starts running her hands all over my body.

“Your skin’s so soooooft! And your hairrrr! And your wittle arms! And you smell so good! Eeeeeeeee!”

She keeps... touching me... Keeps... touching... my...

...I don’t think I like this “love and attention” very much.

Subject: Kiriyama Yui

Evaluation Failed

Notes: SCARY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

After Yui-san has her way with me (not like that — I'm fine, I swear), I sit in stunned silence for a while.

"But the war's not over yet. Not for me."

I stagger to the fridge and grab a vanilla ice cream bar from the freezer. As I eat it, I can feel my stamina slowly recovering.

"Much better!"

Ice cream: truly humanity's greatest invention. It miraculously refreshes my mind and draws out what little strength I have left.

Four down, two to go. I don't know who will be next, but as the interviewer, I have to be thorough. For both my brother's sake and my own. Now come on down!

I sit in the living room and wait quietly.

Then, right as I finish motivating myself... as if on cue, *she* walks in.

"Thought I'd come see you on my way to the restroom."

I freeze like a deer in headlights. The room goes so quiet, I can almost hear the whisper of an ominous breeze... Well, in my mind, anyway.

Standing before me is Inaba Himeko, Taichi's first-ever girlfriend. And as much as I *hate* to admit it — because it infuriates me — she strikes me as beautiful and classy every time I see her.

"Long time no see," I reply as she looks at me from the living room doorway. But I don't ask her to have a seat. She can keep standing for all I care.

"Yeah, definitely."

Then I take my first swing.

"Has my brother been treating you right?"

"Sure, I guess. He's a good boyfriend, and I'd say everything's going well."

"He's not a total doormat, is he? Does he know when to man up?"

"In our relationship, we're both equal partners who support each other."

“So you know when to be strict with him? Because you can’t coddle him all the time — if you give him an inch, he’ll take a mile. But I’m sure you know that.”

“Yeah, of course. I’ve been dating him long enough to — What are you, my mother-in-law?! Why do I even bother putting up with you?!”

She snaps at me out of nowhere. Sheesh.

“Look here, you little brat! Taichi has his own life, and you need to mind your own business! This is why he doesn’t want to bring his friends around you, just FYI! Find someone else to micromanage!”

“He needs me! You know what he’s like! He’d be useless without me around to look after him!”

I’m not letting him off the leash just yet. Not until he learns to report back to me!

“You have no proof of that!”

“I don’t *need* proof! He’s my brother!”

“Yeah, well, he’s *my* boyfriend!”

“Hah! For now, maybe! If either of you decided to break up, you’ll go right back to being strangers again — unlike me!”

“But you’re just his sister. You’ll never be his life partner — unlike me.”

“*Life partner*? Please! You aren’t strong enough to support my brother! You don’t have what it takes as a woman!”

“Yeah, well, I have what it takes as his *girlfriend*, clearly!”

“Doesn’t matter, because I’m more competent as his *sister*! Get good, scrub!”

“Excuse me?!”

“Excuse *you*!”

“Rrrrgh!”

“Nnngh!”

I’m not gonna let her win! It’s *way* too early to entrust her with my brother!

Subject: Inaba Himeko

Girliness: B

Love For Taichi: A

Rival-ness: A

But She'll Never Beat Me: B (meaning I'll win)

Notes: For some reason I always end up in an argument with her. This is probably Taichi's fault. Get it together, Taichi!

"Haaahhh... I'm so tired..."

With a heavy sigh, I munch on my second ice cream bar of the day. The cold vanilla dances on my tongue, easing my fatigue, and I recover a tiny amount of strength. Good thing Inaba was the final boss! Now I can write up my formal report and use it to—

"Um... Sorry to bother you... How's it... going...?"

Another girl peers into the room, like a bunny rabbit peeking up out of the tall grass. She has thick, poofy brown hair and big, round eyes. Then, slowly, she walks in. A white hoodie hugs her curvy frame, dressed down with a casual pair of jeans. But this "girl next door" style makes her seem approachable and friendly, like she's just here to have fun.

She's short and petite, and if you'll forgive my rudeness, she doesn't really look like a high-schooler at all. But she doesn't feel like a middle-schooler, either. If I were to describe her, perhaps the best way would be... She feels like the perfect "little sister" archetype...

Wait, what am I saying?! *I'm* the little sister here!

"I, um... I was told it was my turn to speak to you, so... Oh, right, I don't need to get all formal with a grade-schooler... Say, um, Rina-chan, would you wanna chat with me for a bit?"

"Ugh, you're so cute, it's CRIMINAL! Are you like that at school, too?!"

"C-Criminal?! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"See?! That's what I'm talking about! How are you so darn cute?!"

The more she flounders, the more I want to help her! But *I'm* the cute little sister — if anything, *she* should be helping *me*! And yet... if anyone were to see us right now, they would think *I* was the older one... She's stealing my spot!

"Oh, I haven't introduced myself, have I? My name is Enjouji Shino, and I'm in the Cultural Research Club with Taichi-senpai."

"Taichi-senpai'?! Ugh, you're a kouhai character, too?!"

A younger student with a "little sister" aesthetic... *and* she's in his club... which means she gets plenty of opportunities to talk to him every single weekday...

"H-How do you feel about my brother, Enjouji-san?"

"Oh, um, I love him? I mean, mainly his vo—"

"YOU LOVE HIM?!"

She's so powerful!!! If Inaba's the final boss, then she's the secret bonus boss!!!

And she's practically custom-tailored to suit all of Taichi's little-sister preferences... He probably spoils her rotten... Being around her probably sates all of his little-sister needs... which probably explains why he never wants to hang out with me anymore...

No... I don't want to be replaced!

"Nnnn... You know, ma'am — I mean, Rina-chan — I really envy you. It must be nice to hear Taichi-senpai's sexy voice all day, every day... I wish I was his little sister, too..."

You want to be... his sister...?

OVER MY DEAD BODY!

"Take that! Hyah!"

"Wh-What the?! Ow! ...Okay, it doesn't really hurt, but still! Stop hitting me with your popsicle stick! Th-That tickles!"

"You'll never be better than me, you fake wannabe sister!"

"—Hey! Rina! The hell is going on in here?!"



Before long, it's time for the CRC to go home. Taichi leaves the house to walk them to the train station, and when he returns, he summons me to the living room. Hesitantly, I step inside. Then I walk up to him... and slowly look up at his face.

It's not often Taichi gets really, seriously, majorly mad at me. But today's one of those times.

"Rina, do you know why I'm upset with you?" he asks, and I can tell he's not in a joking mood.

What do I do? He's scaring me!

"I was already planning to introduce you to everyone at some point — at the end of the day, or maybe sooner. But you didn't know that, so instead you tried to talk to them on your own. That I can forgive."

But before I can breathe a sigh of relief—

"However," he continues, "you made them uncomfortable, and that's not okay."

"I... I didn't make them uncomfortable!"

"You forced them to play your little game. You argued with Inaba. You even *hit Enjouji* — and yes, I know you didn't hit her very hard, but still! Not only that, they saw you grading their performance! *All* of that made them uncomfortable! Sure, they were willing to forgive you since you're my kid sister, but I'm warning you now: Not everyone's going to be that patient with you. You're not a child anymore, Rina. You're nearly in middle school now."

"B-But—"

"No buts!"

Tears spring to my eyes. He's really, really mad at me.

"I'm sorry..."

I hate crying in front of other people, but as I apologize, a tear rolls down my cheek.

"I was... just... worried about you... because... you're my brother..."

All I can see is the hardwood floor and a sliver of Taichi's feet.

“Worried?”

“Yeah, because... you hardly ever talk to me anymore...”

Wait, what? Is *that* what’s bothering me?

“You’re always leaving the house, or... in your room, or... on the phone with someone... and you’re busy with school... and it feels like I’m... not as important to you anymore...”

Wait. Wait, wait, wait. What’s going on? Why do I sound like a spoiled little baby? I’m not a baby!

But... now that I think about it... that was my first time seeing my brother surrounded by so many people I didn’t know. Almost like he was a stranger, too.

It feels like I’m going to lose him. I mean, I already have to share him with everyone else as it is... It feels like they’ll take up more and more of his time until eventually he forgets all about me... and then he’ll leave...

“You big dummy.”

The next thing I know, Taichi’s feet are right next to mine, and a big, warm hand is on my head, stroking my hair. It’s so embarrassing, being treated like a little kid. But his hand is firm and strong and makes me feel safe.

“You really think I’m gonna stop caring about you? As if! You know I’m not that kind of jerk, right?”

Trembling, I nod my head as I stare down at the floor.

“You’ll never be less important to me, Rina. I mean, there’s no ranking. ...Actually, maybe this isn’t the best way to explain this.” He pauses to think for a moment, then continues, “You’ll always have a special place in my heart that no one else can fill. You know why? Because you’re my one and only little sister.”

Ugh, this whole conversation is so cringey. Normally we’d never talk about this stuff. But... right now, I need to hear it.

I take a step forward and wrap my arms tightly around his middle. Then I bury my face in his chest. No words. Just love.

“Somebody’s a needy little baby today, hmm?” He gently pats my back.

“Just for today.”

Yeah. I just happen to be feeling dramatic today, that's all. Starting tomorrow, I won't be so clingy and obsessed anymore. If anything, *he's* the one who's obsessed with *me*.

Sniffing, I wipe my tears on his clothes. Hmph! That's what you get for making your little sister cry!

Then I let go, take a few steps back, and collect myself.

"Taichi, you really hurt me, and—"

I start to launch into another lecture, same as usual, but then I decide against it.

"B-But... you're special to me, too. Because you're my one and only brother."

At this, his face lights up with a big smile, and he nods happily. "Cool."

Ugh, I'm so mortified, I want to die! Why are we talking about this? Is this just how siblings are sometimes?

"You know, I didn't realize how attached you were to me," he continues cheerfully. "I mean, obviously I knew you loved me, but... I really appreciate hearing it, you know? Anyway, uh, I have some free time until dinner, so if you want, we could do something together, go somewhere, or—"

Out of the blue, my cell phone starts ringing.

"Sorry, one sec."

"Sure thing."

I check the caller ID. It's—

"Oh, it's my boyfriend!"

I wasn't expecting him to call me over the weekend, so this is a fun surprise. Yay!

Meanwhile, Taichi's smile instantly freezes over, like he's been cast down into hell. Not my problem, though. I switch from Sister Mode to Girlfriend Mode.

"Well, I gotta take this. See you later, broski."

"Wh-... Hey! You're just gonna leave me high and dry?!"

"Sorry, but these things happen. Obviously I'm going to prioritize my boyfriend."

Not like I can date my own brother!

"H-How am I less important than he is?! What happened

to 'You're my one and only brother'?!"

"Bye now!"

And with that, I head off to my room.

"RINAAAA!"

He screams after me like I'm his ex-wife or something.
Pathetic. I ignore him and run up the stairs.

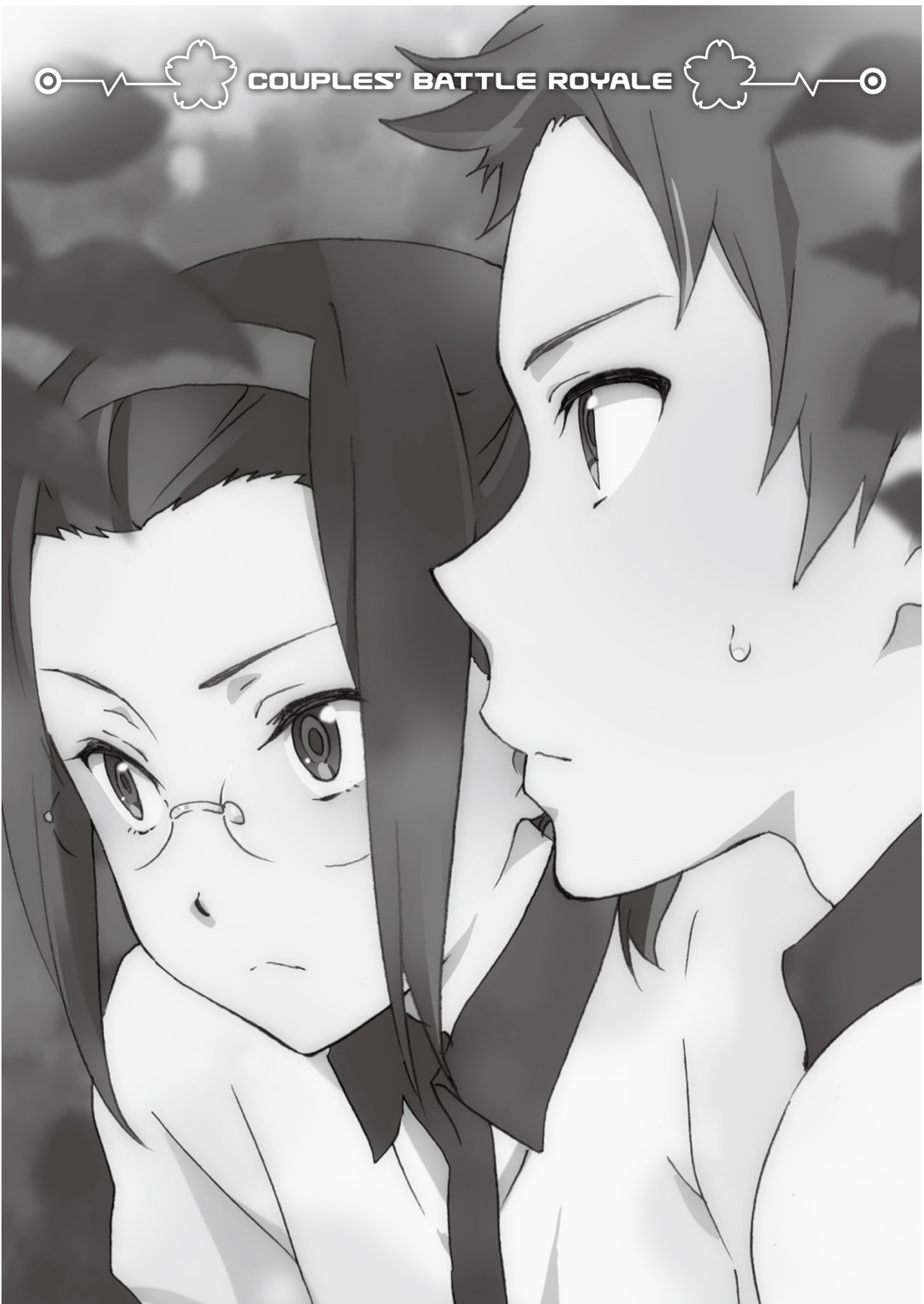
Just like that, a single phone call from my boyfriend has cheered me right up. Now that I think about it, maybe *that's* why I was feeling so dramatic today. I really missed him!

Then again... I *do* think Taichi had something to do with it, too.

So, since I've caused enough trouble for one day, I'll just keep this one last thing to myself:

You'll always be *my* big brother, you got that?!

○—♡— CHERRY COUPLES' BATTLE ROYALE ♡—○



Couples' Battle Royale

"Whew. I'm stuffed!" Watase Shingo exclaimed as he crumpled up his empty sandwich bag. Meanwhile, Yaegashi Taichi packed his bento box back into his bookbag.

Just two weeks had passed since the start of the new school year.

"So let's hear it. How's recruiting going for the Cultural Research Club?"

"We're letting the second-years handle it, and they've risen to the task," Taichi replied as he thought fondly of his two kouhai.

"But there's only two of them, right? Won't they need to find at least three new recruits in order to keep the club alive?"

"I'm sure they'll manage... probably..."

"You don't *sound* sure!"

Spiky-haired Watase was the star of the soccer team, and whenever there was an alphabetical seating arrangement, he always ended up sitting right next to Taichi. Hence, they frequently ate lunch together.

And in the middle of their back and forth, someone walked over from the teacher's lectern.

"I admit, the 'five person minimum' rule comes off as rather arbitrary... but then again, the whole point of making clubs mandatory is to teach students cooperation and what have you, so..."

"If it isn't President Katori himself! Are you gonna overturn the rules for us?" Watase joked.

"I was just making conversation," Katori replied calmly. The way he casually ran a hand through his hair made him look like a TV star.

Katori's term as student council president would formally end in September. This was the first time he and Taichi had ended up assigned to the same class.

Two weeks into the school year, the first-years were probably still learning the ropes. But for the third-years, who had already spent two full years here at Yamaboshi High School, not much was different, save for their new class assignment. It was still too early to start worrying about college entrance exams, and here in Classroom 3-E, the mood in the air was peaceful.

"I suppose the smaller clubs are in constant danger of disbandment," said one Ishikawa Daiki, a tall guy with a burly build and a shaved head. He was currently in a relationship with bright, bubbly Nakayama Mariko.

"While the sports teams never have to worry about that. Must be nice," Taichi muttered enviously.

"Hey, Taichi! Oh, I see all the boys are here."

A girl had entered the classroom. With her sharp, angular features and mature aesthetic, she was perhaps not the most feminine girl in the room, but her modest beauty conveyed a quiet strength that captivated all who saw her. Her glossy dark hair and large, almond-shaped eyes were especially striking.

This was Taichi's girlfriend, Inaba Himeko. He called out to her—

"Himeko!"

"What's the topic of discussion today?"

"Oh, we were just chatting about club recruitment."

"Ah, I see. You know, now that we're third-years, it feels like all those important school events don't really affect us anymore..."

"Yeah, for sure," said Watase. "I've got one more soccer tournament, and then after that, it's just... studying for entrance exams, I guess..."

"You should probably start studying *before* your tournament," Katori chided.

“Uggghhh,” Watase miserably groaned back.

“Just pace yourself so you don’t burn out,” Ishikawa suggested.

“Now that we’re third-years, we’re all going to be too busy to really care about any fun stuff,” Taichi muttered.

“Why so serious?!”

Out of nowhere, a loud voice called out from the hallway. Then she darted into the classroom and ran right up to Taichi.

“*Why so serious?!*” she repeated.

It was Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 3-E, her dark hair tied back, wearing her trademark glasses.

“I mean, this whole conversation you’re having is just so shockingly dull, and for the record, I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop but the window was left open ever so slightly so I happened to overhear—”

“Take a breath, Fujishima!” Katori commanded.

“I always knew you four boys would get along. And you know what else? I always knew you’d drain the fun out of any room!”

“Ouch,” said Taichi. Not much else he could say, really.

“I mean, think about it! There’s no *comic relief character*! You’re all so stoic!”

“I’m stoic?” Ishikawa blinked in surprise.

“You all just heard this lovey-dovey couple calling each other by their first names, and yet no one said a thing! Someone ought to be teasing them for this! If only someone in this group had some proper energy!”

“Relax, Fujishima-san... I mean, I’d say I have a decent amount of energy myself...”

“But you’re not a front runner, Watase-kun.”

“I don’t run fast enough...?” Watase clutched his head in despair.

“If it’s such a problem, then why don’t *you* be the comic relief?” said Himeko.

“I’m *trying*! Right this very moment! All for the sake of our

wonderful class!”

“I don’t think we really need it...”

“Think about it, Inaba-san. Now that we’re third-years, our lives will slowly be overtaken with college entrance exams. It’s a team sport, so we’ll need to be united more than ever... and yet, third-years barely have any special events to bring us together! No more exciting field trips — just the Sports Festival and the Culture Festival, both of which we’ve already been through twice before!”

“Well, it might feel different to experience them as third-years.”

“Maybe for *you*, Mr. President. But without something new to spice things up, there’ll be no chance to spark any new chemistry!”

“Chemistry?” Taichi repeated.

“I’m talking *that* kind of chemistry! With the opposite sex! Or the same sex, if that’s what does it for you!”

As always, Fujishima went out of her way to be inclusive of minorities.

“My point is, we should have an exciting new event here at the beginning of the year, while we still have time! Ooh, a new event... I was just sort of spitballing, but now that I’ve said it out loud, I like it!”

Evidently she was having the entire conversation on her own.

“Frankly, I’d just like to give the single students another chance to find love!”

“Yeah, I think you made that part clear from the ‘chemistry’ thing,” Taichi retorted under his breath.

“And maybe I’ll get a chance of my own... No, no, that’ll never happen. I just want to help everyone live their best lives by boosting morale before we head into entrance exam hell. What I need is an event that will heighten everyone’s chemistry *and* their competitive spirit... I’m not especially hoping I’ll get to have a flirty moment myself... No, of course not.”

“The lady doth protest too much,” Himeko shot back.

“Well, I wouldn’t be opposed to coming up with some sort of event.”

“Thank you, Katori-kun, oh great and glorious leader! I knew you’d understand! Anyway, now that that’s settled, it’s time to put my plans into action! I’m going to rope in the entire school, I promise you that!”

“You really don’t have to—”

“Yes, I *do*! I said I will, so I will!”

“...I wish I knew where she gets her determination,” Katori muttered, staring after her in awe.

But as it turned out, that was only the beginning. Following a direct appeal from Fujishima and the rest of the student council, a brand-new event was confirmed just three days later. Everyone was gossiping about Fujishima and her Superman powers.

But though Fujishima was powerful, she was still an ordinary human being. She just knew how to use the tools at her disposal. So if anything, she was Batman.



“It’s time to announce the new event!”

Three days after Fujishima spontaneously decided to create a new school event, she stood at the front of Classroom 3-E during lunch, scribbling away on the chalkboard. The fact that every single student was present for this spoke volumes to Fujishima’s natural charisma.

Tanaka-sensei & Hirata-sensei’s Happy Wedding Bouquet Toss: COUPLES’ BATTLE ROYALE!

“I’m a little concerned about the part in all caps,” Taichi retorted under his breath.

“Man, I can’t believe Tanaka actually got Hirata Ryouko-sensei to marry him!” he heard Watase exclaim behind him. “I mean, yeah, we were all worried about what would happen if the two of them ever had an awkward public breakup, but

if she said yes, then I gotta give him props... Wait!" He looked up suddenly. "Wasn't it the CRC who spread that paparazzi photo that got them to confess their love in the first place?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"So in a way, it's thanks to you guys that they're getting married... Wait, was that too low-energy? I mean, uh, *wow!* You guys are like, totally Cupid and stuff!"

"Dude, settle down. We need to be listening."

Meanwhile, Fujishima had written out all the rules of the event on the chalkboard.

"I'll explain all the little details on the big day, and we're planning to pass out flyers to everyone, but for now..."

RULES

Elimination free-for-all! Last one standing wins!

Entrants must compete in pairs (any gender)

Each pair starts with one fake flower—battle to earn more

Battles can be anything as long as all participants agree

Winning pair takes all flowers from losing pair

The pair that gathers the most flowers within the time limit WINS!

"So it's a battle royale... but in pairs?"

"And this is supposed to celebrate our teachers' wedding how exactly?"

"I have no idea how she's planning to involve the whole school in this..."

While the rest of their classmates were still discussing amongst themselves, Himeko took the initiative to ask Fujishima directly:

"Are you sure you can get enough people to participate in this?"

"Oh dear. *That's* what you're worried about?"

"Can you blame me? I mean, without participants, you won't have much of an event. Nobody's going to want to

take part in some weird game they don't understand."

"Normally that would be true, yes... but what if I told you the winners would receive a special prize sanctioned by the principal *and* the school board?" Fujishima asked.

There was a meaningful pause as the room stirred to life.

"And what if that special prize was *incredibly valuable* to everyone here?"

"...What kind of prize are we talking about?"

"Well, you see," Fujishima began, "the prize is..."

There was another, more meaningful pause. Interest was at an all-time high.

"...the right to represent Yamaboshi High School by recording a wedding speech to be played at the reception!"

The word *reception* echoed and faded into silence. For a while, no one said a word.

"Uhh... I mean, I'm not opposed to it, but..."

"How is that 'incredibly valuable'?"

As the class voiced their confusion, Fujishima wagged a scolding finger at them.

"That's not all. You'll earn the right to give an opening speech at the Culture Festival, too."

"...Uhhhhh..."

"I'm sure *some* people would enjoy speaking to a huge crowd, but..."

The enthusiasm for this event was rapidly deflating, and it was starting to look like no one was going to sign up.

"Oh, for crying out loud. Do I have to hit you over the head with it? The pair who wins this tournament will earn the title of 'Student Representative' for the rest of the year. You know, like a formal position."

"So *what*?" Himeko snapped impatiently.

"The Student Representative title is school-sanctioned. That means it'll go on your permanent record. And *that* means you can list it on your college applications. Can you guess what will happen from there?"

Fujishima slammed her hand against the chalkboard like

a passionate orator.

"Why, it'll boost your appeal as if you were the student council president! Especially if you're trying to get in on a recommendation!"

"Ooh."

"That's..."

"Actually..."

"Kind of awesome...?"

At last, the mood in the room started to turn hopeful.

"If you're applying the old-fashioned way, it may not help you much... but it certainly couldn't hurt, don't you think? You'll be able to list both your club activities *and* a lofty position as Student Representative. If I were a college recruiter, I'd love to see that."

"Ooooh..." the class murmured.

"Now mind you, getting into a good college isn't the end-all, be-all. But you may as well try to get the most out of your life, because it's harsh out there in the real world!"

"Yeah!" the crowd cheered.

"Not only can you compete against your peers in a fun and exciting school event, but you stand to gain a boon for your permanent record, *and* you can use the pair rule as an excuse to team up with your crush!"

Suddenly, this Battle Royale didn't seem to have any downsides anymore. There were still a lot of questions left unanswered, but... it seemed like a good prospect...

"Now doesn't this sound like the best thing ever?!"

"YEAH!"

Now the class was completely on board.

"Now then, everyone! If you're going to take part, you might as well try to win! Your fellow classmates are your friends, yes, but they'll be playing for keeps. And this event is meant to hone your competitive spirit in preparation for the entrance exams."

Some things could only be gained by those with the ambition to seek them.

“Your task: to fight and to win. In the Battle Royale, victory is everything! Carve these words into your soul, and it might just lead you to real friendship and true love!”

“YEAH!!!”

The cheers of Classroom 3-E were so loud, they drowned out the five-minute bell signaling the end of lunch.

“Oh boy... If everyone’s pumped to do this thing, then maybe I should, too!”

As Taichi clapped, he could feel his heart racing with excitement. Sure, part of it was probably peer pressure, but we’ll ignore that for now.

“Listen up, Yaegashi,” Watase called. His expression was strangely tense. “I’ve just decided: It’s time for me to resolve that unfinished business of mine. I’m gonna shoot my shot, and I’m gonna score!”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“I’m gonna pair up with Fujishima-san, and we’re gonna win the tournament.”

“Are you sure she’ll want to pair with you? You haven’t even spoken to her about it.”

“...And when we win, I’m gonna man up and make a total ass of myself by asking her out. Because I know that’s what you’d do in my shoes.”

“So you’re saying I always make an ass of myself...? Also, I really don’t think it’s going to be that easy to win...”

“Love is never easy, dumba! And for the record, this’ll be my first time making the first move!”

“You know, I always suspected, but... you don’t actually have game with girls, huh?”

“Sh-Shut up, man!”

“So *that’s* why it’s taken you this long to act on your feelings...”

“Don’t judge me, Yaegashi! I’m not a coward, alright?!”

And so a new story began. As for the protagonist, well, it was 99 percent safe to say it was Fujishima Maiko.

At one point, Taichi got curious enough to ask what

compelled her to set this up, and her answer was this:

“In just a few short weeks, I’ll be charging headfirst into entrance exams. So if I’m going to chase my teenage dreams, this will be my last chance.”

+++

The weather was bright and sunny — perfect for a Battle Royale. Out on the athletic field, the students who had successfully registered for the event were now standing around in their gym clothes, gathered in pairs. This dress code was put in place simply to ensure everyone would have full range of motion, but now the event was starting to feel like a Sports Festival knockoff.

Technically, parents and other related parties were permitted to come and observe the event, but as it was still early in the morning, there were no adults to be seen.

For me, Fujishima Maiko, this was the Saturday of Reckoning.

After speaking to my fellow outreach committee members in charge of registration, then getting a good look at the number of students still waiting in line, I estimated approximately 300 pairs would be competing today. Assuming each of those pairs battled one-on-one, the winning pair would need to survive eight different battles. And if we could ensure that those individual battles didn’t drag on too long, we would theoretically finish the event by this evening.

There were some guy-guy pairs and girl-girl pairs, but the overwhelming majority were guy-girl pairs, plenty of which were already dating. Each of the registered pairs carried a single fake flower styled like a red rose.

Everyone competing today was aiming to win... myself included. For once in my high school career, I wanted to be number one at something. That way I could submit myself to entrance exams with no regrets.

“This is my last hurrah.”

This event would surely lead to a rash of new couples springing up like daisies, as well as deeper friendships. Even I stood a chance at finding my soulmate. Starting now, I would soon face off against countless fellow students, strengthening my bond with my partner and...

My bond with... my partner...? *Wait, why does it feel like I'm forgetting something?*

“I... I didn't speak to anyone about teaming up?!”

This was an earth-shattering realization. I was so busy prepping for the event, it had completely slipped my mind.

Nervously, I glanced around. Most people were already paired up; I could tell based on the flowers they were holding. But a handful of people didn't have flowers. After all, this event was fairly spontaneous, and it was hard to pick a partner without knowing for sure who would actually show up. Evidently a lot of people had decided to wait until the big day to decide.

Plus, this was the perfect setup for a cute moment like:

—*Looks like no one's gonna pick us. Wanna team up with each other?*

—*Y-Yeah, I guess we pretty much have to!*

Anyway, all that aside... I needed to find a partner, and quickly. But who? Ideally, I wanted someone who would bolster my own chances of winning, and the first person who came to mind was Katori Jouji, the ultra-competent student council president.

However...

“Hey, guys! Look over there!”

“Oh my god, did they team up?”

“Now there's a power couple!”

Following the gazes of the students around me, I noticed President Katori standing beside Yamaboshi High School's most eligible bachelorette, the radiant and beautiful Nagase Iori.

“Damn. She was my second choice,” I muttered. Honestly,

they were both so ridiculously overpowered, it felt downright *unfair* to let them pair up.

My third choice was Yaegashi Taichi, but knowing him, he'd take this opportunity to team up with his dear girlfriend Inaba Himeko. *Lucky bastard*. So what were my other options?

"F-F-Fujishima-san!"

As it would happen, that was when someone hesitantly called my name.

"Oh, hello there, Watase-kun."

It was Watase Shingo, one of few students who I had shared a class with for all three years of high school. He was a respectable young man, and at one point, something he said to me changed my life forever. Without his encouragement, I never would have committed to the path I found myself on today.

"If you don't have a partner, would you wanna... I mean... We should team up!"

Bowing his head, he thrust his hand out in my direction. Almost like he was asking me to be his girlfriend or something. Not that I knew from experience, of course, since no one had ever asked me out. *Wait, did he just ask to be my partner?*

First impressions of Watase Shingo: a tall, handsome boy with a charming smile. As the star player on the soccer team, he was sure to have strong athletic reflexes. His grades were average at best, but that wasn't to say he was unintelligent; far from it. He simply chose not to study.

As far as partners went, I could do a lot worse.

"Are you planning to win?"

"Damn right! Let's win this thing!"

His passionate words matched the look in his eyes.

"Very well. I hereby entrust my fate to you, Watase-kun!"

I took his offered hand and gave it a firm shake. His palm was sweaty, probably from the heat.

Now it was time for me to get my head in the game.

“I’ve done a great many things during my time in high school. At times I lost sight of myself, but even then, I always had fun. But while there were times that I briefly stood in the spotlight, I was never number one.”

I wasn’t special. I acted like I was the king of the hill when I was really just run-of-the-mill.

“So just this once, I’d like to come out on top. Maybe then I’ll finally find my soulmate.”

“Wait, what did you just—”

In the end, 602 students gathered under the clear blue sky that day. Then it came time to announce the official rules. I was originally planning to handle it myself, but the others told me I had already worked hard enough, so they filled in for me.

“Alright, everybody! It’s time for a word from our special guests!”

On cue from the student council vice president, Tanaka-sensei and Hirata-sensei walked onstage.

“Whoaaaaa!”

“I didn’t know they were coming!”

“Ryouko-sensei looks so pretty!”

“Congratulations!”

“Man, I still can’t believe Tanaka stole Ryouko-sensei from us...!”

As they stood in front of the mic, Tanaka-sensei looked as stoic as ever, while Hirata-sensei was wearing her usual cheerful smile.

“Frankly, I have no idea why this is happening. All I know is that the rest of the faculty wanted me on board as the supervisor, and now here I am, wasting my morning when I could be doing more important things...”

“Oh, don’t mind him! I assure you, we’re very flattered that you would hold a special school event in our honor. Let’s all have fun today, but be sure to stay safe!”

Her voice was chipper and cute, like a pop star’s.

“Now then, I hereby announce the start of, uh — *What’s it called again? Oh, there it is, thank you* — Tanaka-sensei & Hirata-sensei’s Happy Wedding Bouquet Toss: Couples’ Battle Royale! ...Wait, what?! That sounds dangerous!”

10:00 AM — the start of the tournament.



According to the rules, anytime two pairs crossed paths and agreed to fight, a battle would then begin. But since everyone was currently grouped up in the same location, we were instructed to scatter ourselves all across campus to spice things up.

Music played over the intercom speakers, signaling the start of the event.

“Let the games begin! Hold your heads up high as you trample your opponents’ corpses underfoot! Only one pair may reign victorious, and to that pair we shall grant the school’s highest honor... Why are you having me read this drivel?”

But Tanaka-sensei’s complaints fell on deaf ears as the entire student body roared to life. I could smell the bloodshed on the horizon. From now on, I was a competitor like all the rest.

Technically the student council was in charge of running this event, but since it’d be a crying shame to miss out on participating, they had joined the fray. For the early stages, since there were no formal judges, students were expected to follow the honor system to determine the winner and loser of each battle; the losers would then go back to running the event.

“It’s finally begun,” I murmured as I concealed myself behind the hedges at the back of the school building.

“Sure has... So, uh, why are we hiding, exactly? Shouldn’t we be out there fighting?” asked my partner, Watase Shingo.

“First things first, we need to plan our battle tactics.”

“Oh, good point. We could probably survive two or three battles by just winging it, but if we’re going to win, I guess we’ll need a strategy.”

“Fortunately, I’ve already devised the perfect plan, and now I’m going to put it into motion.”

“Damn, that was fast!”

I moved stealthily, crouching along the ground, making sure no one would notice. Likewise, Watase followed suit.

“Uhhh... what are we doing?”

“Stay low!”

He started to peek over the hedges, so I grabbed his head and pulled him back down behind cover. How could he possibly think it was safe to lower his guard?

“Seriously, why are we hiding?”

“Ever heard of reconnaissance? If we underestimate the power of the current, it’ll pull us under. Thus, before we take action, we need to determine which of our opponents are the most dangerous.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” he nodded. “I guess we ought to play it safe if we’re really trying to win. Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

Fortunately, my partner was the sensible sort. I was starting to think I made the right choice by pairing with him.

“Well then, I take it you know what our next step will be?”

“Um... Make a list of games we’re both good at, then challenge our opponents to something from that list?”

“Too pedestrian! A strategy like that would require at least one of us to be skilled in the art of persuasion. After all, if the other pair rejects our challenge, we’ll be forced to draw something from the Battle Box instead.”

Per the rules, we were allowed to choose whatever style of competition we liked, as long as all participating parties agreed. However, if the competing pairs couldn’t come to an agreement, they were then required to locate one of the many “Battle Boxes” filled with challenge suggestions and draw from it at random. This would ensure a fair fight

between students.

“So what do we do?” Watase looked at me, perplexed.

“We pick off the weak ones, that’s what we do! I call it Operation Survival of the Fittest!”

“What?”

“Ideally, the stronger players will take each other out in the meantime. This is an elimination-style tournament, so the number of opponents will shrink rapidly over time. That’s why we had Tanaka-sensei talk about ‘trampling corpses underfoot’ and all that — after all, it wouldn’t be much fun if everyone was trying to be sneaky, now would it?”

“Then why are *we* trying to be sneaky?”

“Oh, they won’t notice if it’s just one team! Obviously we can’t stay hidden forever. We’ll be the dark horse candidate at the end!”

“Is this really going to deepen our friendships...? I guess I shouldn’t worry about that if we’re trying to win...”

“What are you muttering about? Look! The Yaegashi-Inaba pair is about to battle!”

~Yaegashi Taichi/Inaba Himeko VS Sone Takuya/Miyagami Keisuke~

As they were walking down the first-floor hallway of the East Wing, Taichi heard the battle signal.

“Ina — er, Himeko, just checking, but — ouch!”

Out of nowhere, Himeko flicked his forehead.

“I heard that! You were about to call me Inaba again! You *promised* you’d call me Himeko!”

“I know! I’m sorry!”

This was a recent development that took place over spring break, and Taichi hadn’t quite gotten used to it. As she pouted her lips, he reached out and stroked her hair.

“C’mon, I’m really sorry.”

“...Well, I’ll forgive you.” Embarrassed at her own childish antics, she sheepishly scratched her cheek.

Normally she was always so stoic in class. How many people had seen this side of her? Possibly just him... and if so, part of him wished he could keep it that way. Or was he being too possessive?

“Anyway, just checking, but... what’s your game plan? Do you want to win, or...?”

“Damn right we’re gonna win!” She folded her arms like a badass. “I’m not planning to half-ass this. I’ll show them we’ve got what it takes to be the best... and I’ll do it all for you!”

“C-Cool... Why for me, though?”

“What do you mean? Don’t you want that Student Representative title to go on your permanent record?!”

“I mean, sure, but...”

He didn’t quite understand why she was getting so worked up over it... but then she frowned sadly.

“I just... want us to go to the same college, that’s all. And right now it looks like my top choice might be out of your range, so if you had something that could boost you up...”

This was something Taichi hoped for, too. But he didn’t want to hold her back from pursuing her dreams to the fullest extent, so he’d kept it to himself.

“Thanks, Himeko. We can talk about it more later, so for now, let’s focus on the tournament. I’m gonna win for you, too.”

“Oh, Taichi...”

Himeko gazed at him passionately, her long-lashed eyes locked on to him, pulling him in—

“THIS IS NO TIME FOR FLIRTING, YOU LOVEBIRDS!!!”

A deafening scream threatened to shatter the windows. Taichi whirled around to find Miyagami Keisuke standing there, his rectangular glasses askew and his carefully styled hair fluttering as he gasped for breath. Beside him was Sone Takuya, a chubby guy from the Manga Club. Last year Taichi

had shared a class with both of them, but this year they were separated.

"The heck are you doing in the middle of the hallway?!"

"*Excuse me?*" Himeko shot Miyagami a sharp glare.

"Eeek! I... I'm sorry!" He shrank back.

"Dude, come on! You were off to a good start and then you dropped the ball!" Sone shouted at him.

"Did you two pair up?" Taichi asked.

"Yes, we're a pair, okay?! Unlike *you*, we're single, and we couldn't find any girls to get with, so we ended up stuck with each other!"

For some reason, they were both livid. But what had set them off?

"Screw it. This is for all the single guys out there... I'm going to beat these lovebirds! I demand a battle!"

"You know we're not your enemy, right?" Taichi blinked.

"And to be clear, we have the right to reject any challenge," Himeko mused as she reviewed the rules.

"Wh-What, you chicken? You can't just run away!" said Miyagami.

"Actually, they can. If they don't want to fight us, then the rules allow them to make a run for it instead," said Sone.

"But if we can't beat a couple of nobodies like you, then we'll never take home the prize. You're on," said Himeko.

"You don't mind, right, Taichi?"

"Go for it," Taichi nodded.

And so it was decided that they would battle.

"Uh, Miyagami? Did she just call us 'a couple of nobodies'?"

"I always had a feeling she saw us that way... and frankly, if you compared us to her, I don't think we'd come out on top in *any* category..."

"Guys, you don't have to say the quiet part out loud," Taichi retorted without thinking.

"But just think about it, man! Do you really think we'd start a fight we know we can't win? Of course not! Your

hubris will be your downfall!” said Miyagami.

“Yeah! Just this once, we’re going to beat you, Yaegashi!” said Sone.

Apparently they cared more about winning this one single battle than anything else. Miyagami thrust his fist in the air, then swung his arm down, pointing at Taichi.

“Now we’re going to choose the competition. And we choose... rock-paper-scissors!”

“Rejected.”

“Whaaaa?!”

“Hey, c’mooooon!”

Evidently neither of them had expected Himeko to shoot them down point-blank.

“Inaba-san, don’t you think it’d be polite to accept our proposal? We’ll each take turns, best three of five. Rock-paper-scissors is actually a lot harder than most people realize, y’know?”

“The battle can’t happen unless both parties agree on the format. I’m well within my rights to refuse.”

“B-But if we don’t play rock-paper-scissors, then we don’t stand a chance at winningggg,” Sone whimpered.

“Well, that’s the whole point of the Battle Boxes, isn’t it? To keep things fair. Let’s see... The closest one iiiis...”

“Have a heart!” said Miyagami.

“We stayed up all night coming up with this strategy!” said Sone.

Together, they bowed their heads, almost as if they’d already lost the battle.

“...What should we do, Taichi?” Himeko asked as she looked at the other pair with a pitying expression.

“I’d rather just go with their suggestion, but... I’m *really* bad at rock-paper-scissors.”

“Trust me, I know. And I’m guessing they’ve got more tricks up their sleeve.”

“Which means we’d be at a major disadvantage...”

But before Taichi could recommend playing it safe, Sone

muttered:

“...Huh. I guess their love isn’t as powerful as I thought.”

“What, you think we can’t handle it?! You’re on!”

“Himeko?!”

In a blink, she had taken the bait. *Oh boy. I’m really not sure we’re going to survive this tournament.*

“So you agree? Well, alright then!”

Miyagami exchanged a high-five with Sone.

“Yaegashi’s *notoriously* bad at rock-paper-scissors! We’ve got this in the bag!”

“Uhhh... Is that your entire strategy...?” Taichi asked, baffled and mildly terrified.

“Heh! Rock-paper-scissors is all about luck. Normally we’d only have a 50-50 chance of winning, but there’s no way we’ll lose to you! Heads up, spectators — we’re about to battle!”

Miyagami raised his hand to draw attention from everyone nearby. At this, a few pairs wandered over to observe. Taichi had wondered how the “honor system” could possibly be viable in a competitive event, but with an audience present, there wasn’t likely to be any foul play.

Huh?

From out of left field, he felt someone watching him. And when he looked over his shoulder, he thought he glimpsed someone ducking out of sight...

“Well, there’s no going back now. Let’s do it.”

“I knew you’d be a good sport, Inaba-san! Alright, Sone, you go first!”

“Leave it to me!”

“Okay then. Taichi, you’re up.”

“What?” Taichi, Miyagami, and Sone all reacted in unison.

“Just so we’re clear, Inaba-san, we’re not trying to bully the poor guy! We wouldn’t ask you to subject him to humiliating defeat right out of the gate!”

“You really think I’m *that* bad at it...?”

“Relax. He’ll be fine. Alright, Taichi, I want you to — and if

it's a draw, then — got it?" Himeko whispered into his ear.

"You sure?"

"Trust me." She sounded fully confident.

"Alright, let's get started! Here we go!"

But right as Sone took a step forward, Himeko called out:

"Just so you know, Taichi's gonna play rock. Good luck!"

She gestured with both hands as if to say *have at it, boys*.

"What?" Once again, the three of them reacted in unison.

"Wh-What was that about? Is she playing mind games with us...? I thought they only do that in manga..." Despite some confusion, Sone still seemed excited to play.

"Remember, you're going to play rock!" Himeko called.

Then the game began, and all Taichi could do was trust in his girlfriend.

"Rock, paper, scissors!"

Sone played rock, and Taichi played paper. Winner: Taichi.

"Wh... I *lost*?!" Sone fell to his knees right there in the middle of the hallway.

"Wh-Why would you play rock, Sone?! And how did Yaegashi know to play paper?! Did Inaba-san mess with your head?! Or was it all just a coincidence?! I'm so confused!" Miyagami stammered.

Likewise, Taichi didn't really understand it either... but it was *way* too convenient to be mere coincidence.

"If you tell your opponent you'll play rock and they believe you, they'll play paper," Himeko explained. "But if they suspect you *want* them to play paper, then they'll play rock. Make sense?"

"Oh, because they think you're going to play scissors. I get it now," Taichi nodded.

"So in that situation, playing paper is the safest choice. Also, since rock doesn't require you to change your hand when you play it, you can increase the chances of your opponent playing rock by putting the idea in their head. Especially if they're nervous. Anyway, that about sums it up."

"It makes sense when you lay it all out like that, but... how did you come up with that on the spot?!" Miyagami wailed.

"Are you sure you should have told them all that?" Taichi asked.

"Hah. You think that's the only mind game I know how to play?"

"Eeeek!"

And so the battle was decided.

Winner: Yaegashi Taichi/Inaba Himeko

Total Flowers: 2

~KiriYama Yui/Aoki Yoshifumi VS Kurihara Yukina/Oosawa Misaki~

"We're gonna clean house, Aoki," I told him as we sat in the courtyard near the entrance to the East Wing.

I was super embarrassed to enter this school-wide event as an official couple with Aoki, but you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

"You know why? Because your college education depends on it."

"Yes, ma'am! With that Student Representative title, I can probably skip all the exam crap and go straight to the interview stage!"

"Will you quit joking around?! This is serious! Your sister *begged me* to help you, FYI!"

"Wha? She talked to you?!"

"Yeah. She was like, 'My little brother's a total dumbass who can't study to save his life, but it's really important to me that he goes to college. So if you could help him out to some extent, it would mean a lot.'"

"Wow, she must really be worried..."

"She prostrated herself on the floor and everything."

"God, Sis, I'm so sorry..." He wiped his tears with his sleeve. *Seriously, pull yourself together.*

He generally knew when to step up, but if he couldn't get into a good college and land himself a decent job, he wouldn't be able to support a family...

"Not that I'm thinking about marrying you or anything, okay?!"

"Where'd that come from?"

"N-Nothing! My point is, we gotta win this!"

"Hell yeah! And I'd love nothing more than to win it with you."

"Seriously, this isn't a game... Okay, technically it is..."

I couldn't argue with his pure, innocent smile. Maybe the most important part was just having fun together, and maybe that would lead us to victory on its own. There was power in fun.

"Oho! I found Yui and Aoki-kun!"

Just then, we crossed paths with girly, stylish Kurihara Yukina and slender, boyish Oosawa Misaki from the track team.

"I had a feeling you'd be with your boyfriend, Yui-chan. As for me, I'm paired up with Yukina."

"Oh, and we're both single and looking for boyfriends!"

"Do we really need to mention that part...?"

"Damn right we do! If we're trying to reel in some big fish, then we need to advertise ourselves!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say..."

As usual, Misaki was the voice of reason when it came to Yukina's antics.

"So anyway, seeing as we're all here..."

There was a pregnant pause as Yukina twisted a strand of wavy hair around her finger. *Oh, I get it. So this is how it starts.*

"Wanna battle?" I suggested.

She grinned. "You sure you wanna lose this early in the game? How will you spend the rest of your Saturday?"

"I could ask you the same thing!"

"Oh, are we gonna battle Yui-chan? Sure, that sounds fun," Misaki nodded cheerfully as she transitioned into warm-up stretches.

Our friendship had a competitive edge to it that I enjoyed a lot.

"Uh, hello? You do know I'm here, right, ladies? Or is this a two-on-one thing?"

"Misaki, let's discuss!"

The two girls turned away and started whispering to each other.

"...Alright, we've decided!"

When Yukina turned back around, she held up a hand in the shape of a gun and aimed it at me.

"Yui, we've had a bone to pick with you ever since our first year."

"But not in a bad way or anything. I'm sure a lot of people feel the same," Misaki added.

"As a proud member of the track team... I have to beat you!" Yukina declared, a fire burning in her eyes. "Like, yeah, even though you have superhuman reflexes, you're not obligated to join a sports team. But then you show up and surpass all my hard work with your God-given talent? I don't think so!"

"I mean, I'm doing karate again..."

"But you're not really trying, are you?"

"What? Of course I'm trying!"

"Look... I'm not trying to judge you, alright? I get it. But I need to do this for the sake of my own petty ego."

If it came down to a matter of pride, then there was no getting around it.

"I'm going to beat you at a physical sport."

"You're on."

"Since, quite frankly, you wouldn't stand a chance of winning an intellectual challenge."

"E-Excuse you! I'm not stupid!"

I'm just kinda slow, that's all!

"Seriously, ladies, are we forgetting I'm here...? I'm a guy, so I'm gonna have an advantage at physical stuff..."

"Now then, what's a sport we can do in pairs?"

Yukina squinted down at her pamphlet, where there was a list of example challenges in case anyone couldn't think of one.

"Let's see here... Oh, how about this? We could do a cavalry battle. It says 'students without exceptional athletic ability should refrain from attempting this,' but I'd say we're okay on that front, yeah?"

"I mean, sure, but... you know I'm like, *really* good at that game, right?"

"Yeah, and that's why we want to beat you at it," Misaki replied like a total daredevil.

"Does this mean you guys are gonna include me after all? Whew!"

Normally a cavalry battle required at least two people to hold up the knight. But other than that, the rules were basically the same. All I had to do was steal their bandanna.

To make sure we wouldn't get too hurt if we fell, we relocated away from the hard pavement to an area with soft grass. That way we only had to worry about, like, falling on our heads or something. Then Aoki boosted me onto his shoulders, and just like that, I was 150 centimeters taller.

"Whoa! Listen, I'm counting on you, okay? Don't hold my legs too tight or I won't be able to evade attacks."

"Roger-dodger!"

In an instant, my view had changed dramatically. Obviously I knew I'd be able to survive a fall from up here, but I was still a little scared.

Meanwhile, Misaki was boosting Yukina onto her shoulders. Her lower body was honed from all that hurdling, so she was able to lift a girl of comparable size with no trouble at all. Now a giant human wall stood before me, and I couldn't pretend I wasn't a little intimidated.

“Perfect! Man, what a view from up here!” Yukina laughed casually. The two of them combined looked roughly 5 centimeters taller than us.

But that was when I felt a twinge of pain pierce my back. I looked over my shoulder. Someone was there, watching us. Judging from the silhouette, it was... Fujishima Maiko? Her gaze felt hungry, like a hunter zoning in on her prey.

But right now, I needed to focus on the opponent in front of me.

“You guys ready? Now we need someone to tell us when to start... You there!” Yukina pointed to a younger male student.

“Three... two... one... Go!”

But neither team moved right away. This was a one-on-one battle, so there was no rush. Instead, we slowly closed in on each other.

As we approached, I thrust out both hands to measure my reach. Meanwhile, the distance between us continued to shrink.

Not yet... not yet... not yet... Now!

Misaki took a giant step, and Yukina swung one hand down at us. I wasn't sure how they coordinated this, but their timing was totally perfect. A five-fingered fang was now hurtling toward my head.

Stay calm and pay attention.

I swatted her hand away with my forearm. Then she tried again from the other side, and I did the same with my other arm. Her torso was now wide open for attack.

Yukina's eyes widened.

This was my chance.

“Aoki! Forward!”

“Got it!”

At his knight's command, the mount charged forward, and I whipped my hand out at the speed of sound.

“Whoa!”

Yukina recoiled backwards to dodge, and my fingers cut

through empty air. I could have made it if I was on my own two feet, but there was a delay between my reflexes and Aoki's. That, and my reach was noticeably shorter than Yukina's. Another strategy would be to take advantage of my small stature to catch my opponent off-guard, but I'd need the full use of my lower body to make it work.

"I swear, I'll never understand how you can be that fast," Yukina sighed as she wiped the sweat from her brow. Then her lips curled in a smirk. "But I've got longer arms, so I think I can take you."

She sounded confident, but I could tell she hadn't let her guard down.

"You can do it, Yukina. We got this!" Misaki called out encouragingly. Honestly, it was impressive she had the stamina to carry someone of her height.

Both of them were formidable opponents... and that meant I needed to go all-out if I wanted to win.

"Aoki, hold still!"

I grabbed his shoulders and hopped up into a half-kneeling position to maintain my balance.

"You're not serious, are you?!" Evidently Yukina could tell what I was planning to do, and it spooked her.

Naturally, this only spurred me on.

Of course, this wasn't going to be easy. It would take every ounce of my concentration. I shifted my weight again and again, trying to get a feel for Aoki's shoulders. Then I sensed the wind blowing against me and adjusted to the pressure. I could feel his pulse beneath my foot.

Then, once I had established my balance, I stood up all the way.

"Holy crap!"

"What is this, a circus performance?!"

"During last year's Sports Festival she had the support of two people, but now she's down to one...!"

I was now tall enough to scan the surrounding area. This was the queen's throne, and I was in charge.

“What kind of stunt is that?!” Misaki murmured, awestruck. And as for Yukina...

Wait, what?

“You just dug your own grave!” she roared, and she didn’t sound like she was bluffing.

Did she set me up somehow? I was pretty sure I had the advantage over her, and yet she looked confident that she was going to win. Internally, I started to waver. Then I felt myself start to lose my balance and hastily re-adjusted.

“Now I’m going to use the same technique Chihiro-kun used to beat you last year!”

Chihiro. The name caught me off-guard. What was she planning to—?

“Look at you, teaming up with your *booooyfriend!* Getting all touchy-feely in public! Like, get a room, am I right?”

...Silence.

No one said a word. Not Aoki, not Misaki, and definitely not me. Even the audience wasn’t sure how to react to that.

“Uh, hello?! I don’t care if the rest of you ignore that, but *you’re* supposed to get embarrassed, Yui! Because what you’re doing right now is *embarrassing*, remember?”

“Ohhhh, okay. So you thought I’d get all flustered and lose my balance?”

“What? Uh... yeah...? Wait, how are you so calm?”

“I mean, I’ve had to put up with people teasing me for like, *months* now.”

Aoki stepped forward, and I used my shins to absorb the vibrations.

“So maybe you should get new material, because I’m over it!”

And it’s all thanks to you!

As I shouted, I leapt forward and swung my arm down at full force, snatching the bandanna from Yukina’s head. Then I landed back in a sitting position on Aoki’s shoulders.

“A-Are you serious...?”

Defeated, Yukina slowly slid to the ground.

Winner: KiriYama Yui/Aoki Yoshifumi
Total Flowers: 2

~Nameless Extras VS Nagase Iori/Katori Jouji~

I ran and ran and ran. Ran into the school building. Then I pressed my back against the wall so at the very least, they couldn't get the jump on me.

What happened to my partner? She was my crush. I was supposed to protect her. But instead we ran away, and now she was nowhere to be seen.

Pathetic, I know. But understand this: You can call me a loser and a pussy all you want, but some things just can't be done. The laws of nature can't be violated. And that pair was surely going to devour us.

When we bumped into them in the hall and they challenged us to a battle, I knew we didn't stand a chance of winning. But I already didn't expect to make it very far in this tournament, and like an idiot, the optimist in me thought maybe it would be fun and memorable to battle Yamaboshi's strongest duo, regardless of the outcome.

I didn't really care what form the battle took. So we went to the nearest Battle Box and drew a random challenge: Balloon Hunt. (Put simply, both teams run around campus with a paper balloon stuck to their heads, each trying to pop the other's balloon with a rolled-up newspaper.)

But that was my biggest mistake.

Why did I ever think to compete on a level playing field with opponents so far out of my own league? Call me a chicken if you like, but I should have chosen something to my own advantage, or at the very least, something to their disadvantage.

Once the battle started, our opponents immediately leapt

into action. Since we were both mixed-gender pairs, it naturally turned into a battle between the two guys and the two girls.

My opponent raised his weapon and swung. Suddenly, what was once an ordinary rolled-up newspaper was now as terrifying as a lead pipe. How did he make it look so intimidating? I didn't stand a chance of fighting him off. I was confident that the second I tried to attack, he would use that split-second opportunity to swallow me whole.

Fortunately I was able to block his first strike with my newspaper, but I wasn't sure I could survive his horizontal slash. I needed to put some distance between us. And with that thought, I took off running into the school building. I dashed up the stairs — up, up, up — then darted into a hallway and pressed my back to the wall.

Thinking back, my idea to “put distance between us” was probably just a cowardly excuse my brain needed in order to swallow my pride and flee. Yes, there was some distance between us now... because I had run off.

But I was the only one who knew this. “Run away” and “establish distance” were interchangeable. Maybe I was about to initiate a killer strategy, and I simply needed this distance in order to plan it out... *Oh, who am I kidding?* I had already abandoned any hope of winning. I just didn't want anyone — least of all *her* — to think that I had fled like a spineless wimp.

“Ah, here you are. Your partner's been eliminated, you know.”

Then Katori Jouji turned up at the end of the hall, and I bolted. How did he know I was on this floor?

I reached the next landing and headed further up. I quickly realized that I was limiting my exits the higher I went, but then it occurred to me that if I had the high ground, that would make it more difficult for them to attack me, and I thanked my lucky stars. My little, round lifeline was still firmly attached to my head.

Meanwhile, I regretted *ever* accepting this challenge “for fun.” If I’d known it was going to be this terrifying, I would have stayed home and spent my Saturday sleeping in.

As I ran, the only sound was that of my own ragged breathing. Could I hear his footsteps chasing after me? I looked over my shoulder... but no one was there. Did I shake him off? Or was he planning to approach from a different direction?

I came to a stop halfway up the stairs and looked at the next landing above. No one was there. Then I turned around... and saw Katori slowly walking up the stairs.

“Hmmm... I suppose it’d be difficult to hit you from below.”

Evidently I was right. I was relieved to know I’d extended my own lifespan for a few more minutes. And yet Katori’s confident smile never wavered... Why?

“Attacks from above, however...”

“Above...?”

I looked in the direction he was pointing, at the next landing — just in time to see a girl flying through the air, her long dark hair streaming behind her like wings. Paired with her pristine white gym clothes, she had the beauty of an angel.

But unfortunately for me, this angel — Nagase Iori — had a weapon.

Her holy blade flew straight through the air, as if to pierce the very heavens... and this divine retribution was aimed straight at my head. Instantly, I knew it was over; I didn’t even have time to raise my own weapon to block it. So instead, I merely accepted it.

The next moment, my paper balloon popped, and she landed beside me on the stairs. I fell to my knees.

“And that’s a wrap! Now we take your two flowers for a total of... six! Neeheehee!”

And so the ethereal goddess reveled in her victory.

Winner: Nagase Iori/Katori Jouji
Total Flowers: 6

**~Uwa Chihiro/Enjouji Shino VS Kimura
Ittetsu/Higashino Michiko VS Shimono
Kazuhiro/Tada Satoshi~**

I didn't care about winning the tournament... but there *was* a certain pair I wanted to beat.

At 11:30 AM, an announcement was broadcast over the school intercom system:

"Any team with fewer than four flowers by the 12 o'clock lunch break will be disqualified."

They'd put this rule in place to weed out any pairs who were actively avoiding battles. To me, it sounded a lot like "Get out there and try to win at least twice, you cowards." But since each pair carried a variable number of flowers, and battles were "winner takes all" style, the fact was, it was theoretically possible to acquire more than the bare minimum through just one battle. That said, it *did* feel awkward to challenge a pair with more flowers than you, since it was kind of unfair. This was something that me and my partner, Enjouji Shino, were really struggling with.

But then, at last, we found our opponents.

"Hey Uwa! This must be destiny or fate or whatever! Since we both have two flowers, I challenge you to a fair fight!" shouted Kimura Ittetsu from the tennis club, his voice needlessly theatrical, as we stood in the hallway.

"Hi, guys!" his partner, Higashino Michiko, chimed in cheerfully.

We seemed perfectly matched, but before we could get started, another pair arrived on the scene.

"Hey! Don't forget about us! We're here, too!" said Shimono Kazuhiro, an infamous slacker with messy hair and thick, black-rimmed glasses.

“C’mon, don’t be so uptight! Just let us join you!” said Tada Satoshi, a guy with semi-long bleached hair and a playboy vibe.

All six of us had been assigned to the same class for two years in a row now.

“Oh, hey, it’s Kimura-kun and Higashino-san. I didn’t realize you two teamed up,” Enjouji mused vaguely. With her poofy brown bob, she was reminiscent of a small woodland creature.

“Well, we already knew you two were going to pair up, so we didn’t bother telling you, but the rest of our class decided our guy-girl pairs by drawing names from a hat,” Higashino explained.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?” I shot back, but she ignored me.

“So yeah, that’s how I got stuck with *this*.”

“What the hell, Higashino?! For your information, you pretty much won the jackpot, because I’m planning to win this tournament!”

“Ooooh... Yikes... That’s unfortunate...”

“Enjouji-san?!”

“Anyways! Moving on!” Higashino clapped her hands together. “Let’s get this show started, shall we?”

“Now hold on a minute! We’re here too, y’know! Don’t start battling without us! And for the record, the two of us only ended up together because the girls were all taken by the time we drew our lots. It’s a tragedy, I tell you! The girls all whined about how none of them got to pair up with their beloved *Tada-kun*, but no one said a peep about me!”

“I don’t care about any of that. Listen up, Shimono: You’re going to need four flowers by noon. Good luck.” I said dismissively.

“Uwa! We’ve already got two, thank you very much! We’re looking for opponents!”

“While the rules allow more than two pairs to compete in a single battle, there can still only be one winner. It’s too

risky.”

“Ugh!”

Then Tada stepped forward. “How very rational of you, Uwa. But that’s not what a real man would do.”

“Yeah! You’re not a real man!”

“Man up, Uwa!”

“Not very manly of you, Uwa-kun...”

“Wait... Chihiro-kun, you’re not a man?!”

“Would all of you kindly shut the hell up?! Especially you, Enjouji!”

As much as I didn’t appreciate their stupid jokes, it would be pretty sad if my loser friends got eliminated because they couldn’t find anyone else to fight. And so it was decided that we would have a three-way battle.

“Now, what kind of battle should we have?”

Noon was fast approaching, so we needed to make it quick.

“Oh, um, I know! We can use voice clips to play Guess The Voice Actor!”

“...Sounds like we’re drawing from the Battle Box.”

“Et tu, Chihiro-kun...?”

We walked into the classroom with the nearest Battle Box, where I drew a challenge for the group: Three-Legged Obstacle Course. On the back of the paper was a small map indicating the start and finish lines.

I had to win this. I couldn’t afford to lose. Not until I battled the pair I had in mind.

The starting line was located at the far edge of the athletic field. When we arrived, sure enough, they’d marked it out with crisp, white chalk. The course was littered with classic obstacle course fare, like cargo netting, burlap sacks, jump ropes, small square blocks with spoons and ping-pong balls on top, and more.

“Man, they really worked hard to plan all this out. If we lose, we’d better go see what we can help with,” Tada mused

as he began his warm-up stretches.

Next to him, Higashino and Kimura were busy tying their legs together.

"I can't believe I have to do a three-legged race with *you*... I wish I got paired with someone hotter..."

"I feel like a three-legged race is already enough of an 'obstacle course,' but then they had to go and add actual obstacles to it... Man, I'm so pumped!"

"Y'know, I kinda feel bad, since me and Tada have an overwhelming advantage here. There's no way Kimura and Higashino will actually work as a team. And while you might be speedy, you've got Enjouji-san weighing you down," Shimono whispered into my ear so my partner couldn't hear, even though she was literally tied to me.

Yes, Enjouji was slow, and she had poor reflexes. Not exactly an asset for an athletic competition. Beside me, she was taking big, deep breaths — completely overreacting, if you asked me. Then she noticed me looking at her.

"Let's do our best, Chihiro-kun!"

For that matter, why was I even paired with her? Then again, if I didn't beat that pair with her, then it was all pointless... Yeah, that's why.

Our ankles were pressed right up next to each other. My skin itched where it touched hers.

The six of us lined up at the starting line. Then some previously eliminated students showed up to serve as judges for our battle, followed by a crowd of nosy onlookers.

"On your mark... Get set..."

With the sunny weather, gym clothes, and spectators, it almost felt like the Sports Festival all over again.

"GO!"

The voice rang out to the clear blue sky, signaling the start of the Three-Legged Obstacle Course. The two of us took our first step.

"Starting from the right!"

"Right! Got it!"

“Three, two, one... Whoa!”

“Eeeek!”

My leg went in a direction I wasn’t expecting, and I lost my balance. The ground rushed up to meet me.

Splat. Flat on my face. Snickers erupted from the crowd.

“Nnnn...”

“Quit whining and get your ass up!” I shouted as I pushed myself off the ground and dusted myself off. “The hell were you doing?! I literally said *starting from the right!*”

“W-Well, if we’re starting with your right leg, then that means my left!”

“No, I was telling *you* to use *your* right leg!”

I thought she understood that, but evidently I should have been more clear. Apparently the two of us weren’t quite on the same page. But we were at a distinct disadvantage here, so we needed to get in sync if we wanted to stand a chance of winning.

“Okay, let’s try this again! This time, we’re starting with our joined leg! Ready? Three, two, one, go!”

I counted out loud so she could grasp the timing.

“One, two... One, two...”

Our steps were two different sizes. She kept yanking my leg backwards, causing the ropes to dig into my skin. This time I tried to match my step size to hers. *Keep trying. Keep trying.*

Eventually, we managed to make (slow, unsteady) progress, even if I did feel incredibly weighed down. And thanks to our slip-up right out of the gate, we were now in third place, with Kimura/Higashino in second and Shimono/Tada in first.

Beyond the minefield of obstacles, I could see the finish line. So close, and yet so far. If only I could untie these ropes, I could easily win this whole race solo... The thought was frustrating. Seriously, why did I have to pair up with Enjouji?

Admittedly, part of me felt like I needed to in order to

represent the Cultural Research Club for the sake of my own personal goal. We were a couple of bumbling idiots, but starting this year, we were going to have to run the whole club on our own.

When it came to solo activities, like karate or schoolwork, I could generally manage just fine. But in terms of club activities, we needed other people simply to survive. Sure, the third-years were still on the club roster, and they popped in from time to time, but they had already passed the torch to us.

From now on, the CRC is yours to shape as you see fit, they said to us. But what sort of “shape” were we supposed to make? Yeah, we had taken charge of recruiting, but it wasn’t exactly going well...

Then we arrived at our first obstacle: the cargo net crawl.

“No need to get all the way down on our knees. Let’s just crouch down!”

Together, we stooped down low to pass under the net. Fortunately Enjouji was already on the short side, so she had no trouble at all. This first obstacle was a piece of cake.

On the other side of the net, we arrived at the burlap sacks. From here, we would need to step into a sack, pull it up to our waists, and bunny-hop our way forward until we reached the end of the section a few meters away. Fortunately, the sacks here were big enough to accommodate two people.

“So we just need to bunny-hop to the end, right? Can... Can we do that?”

“It’s gonna be pretty hard with our legs tied.”

No joke, Kimura and Higashino were currently having a hell of a time trying to make any progress. I could hear them arguing from here:

“We need to be *jumping*! Like, really jumping!”

“What? We’re just going to fall! We should be making little baby hops!”

This was our chance to overtake them. Thus, I decided to

make a gamble.

"Okay, let's both hold on tight to the top of the sack and jump the exact same distance. Think you can do that?"

"Sure! But I feel like you'll jump a lot farther than me..."

"Don't worry about me. Just jump as far as you can, and I'll match you."

"Okay, got it!"

On the count of three, we jumped in unison, Enjouji stretching her legs out as far as they would take her. As for me, I jumped lightly, like gravity no longer applied to me... like I was a leaf in the breeze. Then Enjouji landed, and I landed with her.

Together, we once again counted to three, and then we made another jump. Cheers erupted from the crowd. It felt like we were impressing them with our coordination. Was I getting ahead of myself, or... was it actually working out?

Enjouji prepared to jump again. I followed suit, lightly hopping through the air.

"Wh—?! W-Wait!"

"How are you so fast?!"

We ignored Kimura and Higashino shouting at us, dodged past them, and kept going. We had officially made up for our slip-up at the start, and now we were in second place. Once we arrived at the end of the section, we carefully stepped out of the burlap sack.

"Starting with our joined leg!" Enjouji called.

Together, we set off once more, our feet perfectly in sync. I could see Shimono and Tada just up ahead, but I couldn't afford to let myself get distracted. I needed to focus. *One step at a time.*

Meanwhile, the obstacles continued their onslaught. When we reached the jump ropes, we waited until the rope was right at our feet, pinned it down, then stepped over it. And when we arrived at the spoon race, we ran without dropping our ping-pong balls a single time.

...Who the hell designed this hardcore obstacle course,

anyway?

Enjouji was already wheezing, and even I was slightly out of breath. The course itself wasn't that long, but the obstacles were really wearing us down.

Then, at last, we arrived at the final obstacle: a veritable sea of different hazards, strewn all over the ground as if to decorate the home stretch. It was a straight shot to the finish line, but to get there, we'd have to navigate through a minefield of giant, whirling jump ropes, thick gym mats, and a litany of balls from every sport.

"They expect us to get through all this...?"

With our legs tied, we were sure to trip up and fall. For a moment I questioned whether this might actually be dangerous, but then I noticed that the hazards themselves were all fairly soft, so there was next to no chance of serious injury. *Gee, how thoughtful.*

Shimono and Tada had entered this area ahead of us, so we didn't have time to stop and hesitate. Instead, the two of us plunged forward.

Neither of us had said a word, so I started to worry if Enjouji would be alright. I glanced over, and sure enough, there she was... I mean, obviously she was going to be there, since our legs were tied together. But at some point, my brain had stopped registering her, as if her presence beside me was as natural as the air I breathed.

"I don't know about this..."

"Whoa, whoa!"

Seconds later, Enjouji had already stepped on a ball and lost her balance. This one was proving to be the hardest obstacle of all; even Tada and Shimono were struggling.

"Agh! Rrgh, stupid balls! Get out of my way!"

"You're wasting time by kicking them! Just avoid them and keep going!"

"I can't just plow forward, or I'll step on them!"

"Alright, fine. Let's take it nice and slow."

Unfortunately for us, their height advantage meant their

steps were a lot bigger than ours. If we were going to win, we'd need to cross this obstacle ocean with big, speedy steps. Could we pull it off?

There were other options, but I had already decided. Sure, it would potentially cost us the race... but without it, we didn't stand a chance.

"W-We gotta take big steps, right?! Which leg do we start with?!" Enjouji asked eagerly. Evidently we were both on the same page.

"Our joined leg!"

The response came to me without even thinking. It just felt right.

It was time to forget all the embarrassment and emotional resistance and simply trust that we understood each other. I could feel her more clearly now. Her movements, her breaths, her heartbeats, her vibes, her presence — all of it informed my own.

We had spent so much time together in class and in the CRC. And now that we were trying to recruit new members, we practically spent all day together, just the two of us. I knew her thought patterns. I knew what motivated her. We were perfectly in sync whether we liked it or not.

I lifted our joined leg and took a giant step toward an empty spot. Would it reach? I didn't know, but... I'd just have to *make* it reach.

And then it did.

Enjouji's legs were spread so far apart, she looked like she was going to topple over... but nevertheless, we made it. I slid an arm around her to keep her upright.

Then we took another step — so big, we were practically jumping. This was the fastest we could possibly go. In a blink, we had closed the gap between ourselves and Shimono/Tada. Then, when the crowd started to cheer, our opponents sensed the impending threat and whirled around. Their eyes widened. But they were just a blur to us now.

We passed them. Now no one was in our way. All we had

to do was reach the finish line without stumbling. It wouldn't be easy, but my gut was telling me we could do it.

Some things were only possible with Enjouji by my side. I couldn't accomplish this alone. And in the end, I was glad I chose to pair up with her. There'd be no point in me winning without her; it wouldn't truly count as a victory.

This was a rare opportunity for all the students of Yamaboshi to fight on even ground with one another, and I was going to surpass my senpai.

Then, as we crossed the white finish line — we couldn't quite gauge when to stop, so instead we ended up tripping over our own feet and falling flat on our faces all over again.

Winner: Uwa Chihiro/Enjouji Shino

Total Flowers: 6

+++

"That was a white-hot battle.... A true clash of egos. But in the end, the CRCIFIT proved victorious! No surprise there!" I exclaimed from behind a tree.

"CRCIFIT... I feel like you've mentioned that at some point in the past," Watase mused.

"At last, all the effort I put into that obstacle course has paid off!" Internally, I did a fist-pump.

"Oh, you're the one who set it up?"

"Anyway, it's almost lunchtime now. I must say, what was supposed to be reconnaissance has turned into a rather enjoyable spectator event! I'm looking forward to the finals."

"Yeah, for sure... Wait! Houston, we've got a problem!"

"What's got you all bent out of shape, Watase-kun?"

"How many times have we battled, exactly?!"

"Just once, when we played paper sumo. Cost-effective, but not very entertaining."

"And how many flowers did we get from that?!"

"Just one, which brings our total up to two... Wait, but

we'll need a minimum of four by noon or else we'll be disqualified!"

"Exactly! We gotta get some more flowers, fast!"

Curses! What an egregious blunder on my part! After observing all those other battles, for some reason it made me feel as though I had won them myself!

"Oh hey, if it isn't Fujishima-san and Watase-kun! Whatcha doing out here?"

Someone had gotten the jump on me. Panicked, I whirled around.

A powerful figure was standing there.

"N-Nagase-san?!"

"Wait, but where's Katori?" asked Watase.

"The event crew wanted to talk to him about something. He'll be back in a minute... Hmm? Is that really all the flowers you have? Because that's kinda not enough."

"We know..."

"Well then, would you wanna battle us? We'd be up for it, y'know," Nagase suggested with a smile.

But while this looked at first glance to be an angel's salvation, in truth, it was a devil's temptation.

"Sure, we don't have the same amount of flowers, but that's—"

"N-No thank you! The offer is much appreciated, but we're going to look for a different opponent!"

We stood nothing to gain from battling someone as overwhelmingly powerful as she. Not right now, at the very least.

"But Fujishima-san, don't you think we should—"

"Don't be absurd, Watase-kun! She's the final boss! We have to save her for last!"

Withdraw! Retreat! Abort mission!

"You say that now, but I feel like you two might just end up being *our* final boss later down the line," I heard her mutter.

So before we fled, I turned back and replied, "Yes, we will."

And we're going to win!"

"Looking forward to it!"

And so, after vowing to reunite in the final round, I set off once more.

Just wait for me... I promise, I'll be the one to strike you down in the end. But first...

"Now then... we need to find ourselves some wimps to curb-stomp!"

"...That's not the kind of game plan you should announce with a smile, y'know..."

"We mustn't let emotions cloud our judgment! All that matters is that we win!"



"Attention, everyone! It's 1 o'clock, and the Couples' Battle Royale will now resume!"

"What happened to the 'Tanaka-sensei and Hirata-sensei's Happy Wedding Bouquet Toss' part at the beginning? Are we just part of the window dressing?"

"Now then, let's have ourselves a climactic finale!"

At the last minute we slapped together a live commentary team, since it seemed like a fun idea. Current guest: Hirata Ryouko-sensei.

Just before the cutoff, Watase and I managed to find another pair with two flowers who were desperate to battle, then narrowly beat them at a game of Tag Team Tic-Tac-Toe. With four flowers in hand, we were now safe from disqualification.

As we walked along the perimeter toward the front gates, I explained my thought process.

"Now then, the battles are only going to get tougher from here on out. Almost all of these pairs have two or more victories under their belts."

"They said more than 75 percent of the competitors have been eliminated, so that's about... 70 pairs left, maybe

less?” Watase put a hand to his chin in contemplation.

“With all the strongest pairs left, it should make for some entertaining battles.”

“...Then why are we headed *away* from the action, Fujishima-san?”

“So that we don’t get dragged into any unnecessary bloodshed, of course! As long as we don’t battle, we won’t get eliminated.”

“Right. The longer we stay in the game, the longer we stay together... but is this really gonna ‘deepen our friendship’ or whatever?”

Since the weather was so nice today, all the students had eaten lunch out on the athletic field, almost like it was a picnic. But now that lunchtime was over, that same field felt like a wild savannah full of savage beasts. So, rather than get caught in the middle of it, I decided to move toward the gates, where I would be kept safely away from the afternoon carnage—

“You guys could participate, y’know,” said Nagase Iori.

“That would certainly make things interesting. But to be clear, we can’t have non-students winning the Student Representative title,” said Katori Jouji.

“EGADS! It’s the most beastly pair of all!”

For some reason, Nagase and Katori were standing over by the front gates, having a lively chat... and they weren’t alone.

“Hmm? Oh, hey! We meet again, Fujishima-san!” Nagase beamed. But to me, she may as well have been the Grim Reaper.

“What are you two doing out here...?”

This place was deserted during the first half of the event!

“We could ask you the same question. Anyway, seeing as you’re here, why don’t we battle?” Katori suggested offhandedly.

“*Non, non, non!* Let’s save that for later, shall we? Hmm?”

“...Y’know, Fujishima-san, you sure are full of pep today.”

But unfortunately for Watase, my attention was drawn elsewhere.

“And who might *they* be?”

One was a girl with angular features and a gallant ponytail, and the other... struck me as vaguely familiar... *Oh, I know.* She looked like Kiriyama Yui with a bob cut.

“This here is Mihashi Chinatsu-san. She’s one of Yui’s... karate buddies, I guess? And this is Yui’s little sister, Anzu-chan.”



"Sup."

"Hi there!"

Ah, I see. Associates of Kiriya Yui. "Nice to meet you; I'm Fujishima Maiko. Are you here to visit our fine campus?"

"Yeah! I heard my sister's doing something fun today, and since Mihashi-san's in town, I thought I'd bring her!"

"Oh my. I'm so glad my little event has drawn spectators." Even the most casual of compliments was enough to warm the cockles of my heart.

"See, Mihashi-san used to live around here, but then her family moved pretty far away. But since she and Yui are karate rivals, she comes by to visit every now and then."

"I don't come here *just* to see her, you know! I just figured I might as well!"

Oho, am I detecting a whiff of tsundere?

From there, the conversation blossomed. I learned that Nagase had made friends with Mihashi through Kiriya. Then she regaled me with the passionate(ly romantic) tale of their rivalry...

Just then, a girl ran past on her way to the front gates. "Prez! Actually, on second thought, maybe I should ask Fujishima-san!"

"Kaori-chan? What's wrong?" asked Nagase.

"My partner and I both have to run errands this afternoon. We were expecting to have lost by this point, but then we kept winning... Anyway, is it cool if we drop out? We already gave our flowers to the staff."

"Oh, that's a shame."

"Ah well. It is what it is. If you're in a hurry, then don't worry about it. We'll get it all sorted out."

"Thanks, Prez! See ya!"

After she was gone, there was a brief pause as we all contemplated what to do.

My mind was racing. If these two girls walked off to explore Yamaboshi, then Nagase and Katori would turn to us and propose a battle! I couldn't let that happen; no, I

needed to avoid it at all costs. After all, we couldn't possibly wage war against the king of beasts without a proper strategy! We needed to lead things in a different direction...

Mihashi... Kiriyaama...

Come to think of it, Kiriyaama was another formidable opponent. I could easily beat her in a game of wits, but if the competition was in any way athletic, I didn't stand a chance. And she had quite a few fans, so I could easily see the crowd demanding something sporty from every battle she took part in. For my purposes, it couldn't hurt to get rid of her sooner rather than later.

Mihashi...

And those forfeited flowers...

Wait...

"What now, Fujishima-san? I say we battle first, and then —"

"B-By Jove, I've got it!"

~Kiriyaama Yui/Aoki Yoshifumi VS Mihashi Chinatsu/Kiriyaama Anzu (Special Round)~

Duels: a somewhat primitive, yet sacred tradition harkening back to days of old, thrilling and terrifying at the same time. One piece of the athletic field had been transformed into an arena, surrounded on all sides by spectators... and I, Kiriyaama Yui, was in the middle.

Across from me stood an old friend and rival, Mihashi Chinatsu, wearing a spare Yamaboshi tracksuit.

The two of us were about to face off...

"Why this?!" I shouted at no one in particular. How the heck did I end up roped into this?!

Meanwhile, I could hear the onlookers whispering to each other:

"Wait, so they're old rivals?"

"If she's on par with Kiriyaama-san, then she must be

good!”

“I heard this is gonna be an all-out karate battle.”

“People would pay good money to see this...”

“Somebody set up a popcorn stand!”

There had to be, like, 50 people watching. At first I was confused, but then I remembered that three-fourths of the 600 entrants had been eliminated, which meant there were currently 450 students with nothing better to do. *Makes sense.*

“As usual, I’m a genius! This is sure to be the highlight of the whole event!”

“We’re lucky we stumbled across a trump card in the form of Mihashi-san.”

“Yes, and we’re lucky *you* were able to convince her, Nagase-san!”

“No, no! I gotta say, this is a brilliant way to get those forfeited flowers back onto the playing field, Fujishima-san.”

“Can you two quit flirting?! This is all *your* fault, just FYI!” I shouted at the two girls patting each other on the back at the front of the crowd.

Rather than leave the forfeited flowers in limbo, they decided the most fair way to reintroduce them would be to give them to a new substitute pair. And that pair was Mihashi Chinatsu and Kiriya Anzu, neither of whom were Yamaboshi students. It made, like, zero sense. But according to Watase-kun, “Everybody loves it when a new challenger joins the fight!”

Whatever that means, I guess.

And since I was the obvious choice of opponent, they decided the most exciting battle would be one-on-one combat between me and Chinatsu.

“Are you sure you’re cool with this? You don’t have to humor them if you don’t want to,” I told her, feeling guilty.

“I don’t care about them. Right now, I only care about you.”

Her eyes glittered as she stared me down. You see, it was

actually *Chinatsu* who first suggested she and I duke it out. After all, it was a rare opportunity to see which of us was stronger... and quite possibly the last chance we'd get while we were still in high school. She explained all this with a confident smirk on her face.

After a brief discussion, we agreed on the following rules:
Punches or kicks only; no grappling.

No barehanded strikes to the face or other dangerous areas.

Each round lasts 3 minutes.

The loser is determined by KO or forfeit.

"Man, those rules are harsh. Reminds me of a pro wrestling showdown."

For a second I thought Taichi had said it, but it turned out to be some rando.

"Well, Yui... All I can really do is offer you towels, water, and emotional support, I guess," said Aoki.

"Sis, I want you to do your best... but right now I'm on Mihashi-san's team, and I'm gonna help her as much as possible. I'm looking forward to your battle!" said Anzu.

Since this was a one-on-one fight, our partners had been demoted to backup. Meanwhile, the crowd continued to grow.

"This is gonna be crazy!"

"Why waste time having our own battles when we could watch this one?!"

Apparently some active competitors had decided to watch us, too. As you'd expect, the chatter was getting louder and louder... and yet I was starting to tune it out. My focus was on Chinatsu and Chinatsu only.

"Now that we're third-years, I guess we won't be reuniting at nationals."

It was a promise we made to each other once upon a time, but now it wasn't looking likely. Not because of some super-dramatic reason, either; due to our differing ranks, we simply couldn't enter the same competitions. Pretty

mundane, I know.

We could always spar on our own time, but it would never be *official*. Just an extension of our training.

"Not that that was my whole reason for doing karate, but... it's always been my dream to beat you."

No wonder she leapt at the chance to battle me. In her mind, this empty field was the tournament arena she always dreamed of... It struck a chord with me. After all, she wasn't the only one who had yearned for this moment.

"I'm gonna prove that hard work can surpass raw talent."

"I don't have *talent*..."

"So you say. And yeah, I know you put in effort, too. I know that. But to me, Kiriya Yui will always be a natural prodigy."

After a few moments of silence in which she glared daggers in my direction, she suddenly turned her back on me, as if to mark the end of our conversation. Evidently it was time to start the battle. But as for me, this was still too sudden, and I wasn't emotionally prepared... I squeezed my eyes shut. Then I took a deep breath and started thinking.

So many people were hoping to win this event. No one was experienced in this, no one had practiced anything ahead of time, and so the playing field was level, which made it easier to feel confident in your own chances. Sure, maybe you'd lose, but on the other hand, maybe you'd win. That kind of thing.

Me personally, yeah, I was hoping to win... No, I was *trying* to win. I wanted Aoki (and myself) to have a leg up when it came to getting into college, and I wanted him (and myself) to win everyone's respect, and I wanted him (and myself) to have one last happy high school memory. I mean, not that I was only doing this for him! I just *really* wanted to win, no matter the challenge. Losing was never fun, but if I was forced to lose, I would accept it gracefully, like a good sport. That was the kind of life I wanted to lead.

If this was an obstacle to my victory, then I would just

have to overcome it.

Once upon a time, Chinatsu criticized me for drifting away from karate. But while karate stopped being my main focus, I gained so many new things in exchange. Precious, irreplaceable things. And then, eventually, I came back to karate like it was my home. Now I wanted to prove to Chinatsu that my life choices were just as valid as hers. To me, this was a battle I couldn't afford to lose.

I opened my eyes, then walked over to Aoki for a minute.

"Yui... All I care about is that you try not to get yourself hurt. The second it feels risky, it's okay to forfeit."

I felt a twinge in my chest. I didn't want to worry him... It made me start to have second thoughts about the battle.

"Just give it your best, okay?"

Then, right at the end, he gave me a tiny bit of encouragement. I could hear all the unspoken feelings behind those words, and while I felt a little guilty, it made me really happy at the same time. I wanted to win this, both for myself *and* for Aoki.

With a thumbs-up, I turned and walked back to my starting position. The crowd's cheers were just background noise to me. Right now, the only other person in my world was Chinatsu.

I felt the grass bending beneath my gym shoes and the air against my skin. Gauging my footing, I scanned the vicinity. Then I fixed my gaze on one specific point.

"We're gonna find out who's stronger, once and for all," Chinatsu declared as she finished her warm-up stretches. She seemed to be downright *enjoying* her position as the away team. But this wasn't much of a surprise, given she'd been waiting for this moment since eighth grade.

"Is there really a point to making such a big deal out of it?" I asked.

"Haven't you ever wished you could have an all-out duel, just once?"

She had a point. Anyone with martial arts training could

relate to that feeling.

"Don't worry. I promise not to totally destroy you," she grinned.

"Yeah, because you won't have the chance," I shot back defiantly.

Sparks were flying. I had lost all sympathy for her; now she was purely the enemy. I dropped into my fighting stance, and the air between us froze. A dark flame ignited in my heart.

"Alright, is everyone ready? We'll have three judges, including me..."

I could hear Fujishima-san talking, but I wasn't listening.

"If at any point it gets too dangerous, we'll stop the match, so try your utmost not to injure—"

Blah, blah, blah. Hurry up!

"BEGIN!"

That was my cue. *Early bird gets the worm.* I moved first, lunging at her with a full-speed jab. I could hear it cut through the air — but no impact. Chinatsu leapt straight back, dodging clear. But I wasn't done yet. It was time for my follow-up.

Following through with my momentum, I unleashed a front kick. But right at the moment I anticipated an impact, she did another one of her flawless backsteps.

To go for a third attack, I'd need to adjust my position — but right as I pulled my leg back, she sprang forward. I put my foot back as far as it would go, but half of my other leg was still within range of her middle kick. The instant she went for it, I knew I wouldn't be able to dodge. I shielded my torso with my arms... and the moment the blow landed, I felt my feet lift up off the ground.

What?! She knocked me back?!

I slid across the ground on my feet, using my backwards motion to reduce the impact. But even then, my left arm still tingled.

"Whoaaaaa!"

“Did you see that?!”

“I don’t know anything about karate, but this is hardcore!”

I was now having slightly more trouble clenching my left hand. My grip strength was decreasing. This would affect the power of my attacks.

I knew going in that Chinatsu was in better shape than me, but maybe I’d underestimated her. Despite her weight advantage, she seemed to be on par with me in terms of speed, or perhaps just a tiny bit slower. That one exchange was all it took to make me realize just how much work she had put into honing her body.

She charged forward, bold and confident. Maybe she’d decided she could overpower me with brute force alone.

Don’t make me laugh!

I kicked myself into high gear. Each step I took was heavier and more precise than the last. Then I aimed a low kick at her left leg. She didn’t try to dodge. The impact made an airy sound — and while it was still echoing, she closed in, as if to suggest my attacks were not a threat, and taking them was a small price to pay to win the war.

A forward punch. Not to the face, but the chest area slightly below. *Bam.*

“Guh...!”

The blow was so intense, it knocked the wind out of me for a split-second. If I’d taken a hit like that to the face... The mere thought sent a chill down my spine.

My low kick was meant to help get me into the rhythm, and I was fully prepared for a counterattack, but the damage I received in return far outweighed what I had dealt. Her leg muscles were a lot more powerful than I had expected. They didn’t look that burly, yet it felt like I was kicking a tree trunk. She was genuinely strong.

Had I gotten weaker? No way. Like, yeah, I had taken a sabbatical from karate at one point, but I had spent the past year-plus getting back into my groove. I was stronger than

ever... but somehow, Mihashi Chinatsu had improved even *more* dramatically. She had probably dedicated her entire high school career to karate.

Sure, I had kept up my training, but at the same time, I had a club to attend, and studying to do, and friends to hang out with... Compared to Chinatsu, I had spent significantly less time focused on my fighting skills.

I could almost hear her telling me: *Don't expect to beat me with one hand tied behind your back.*

Meanwhile, she continued her onslaught. Another forward punch. I jumped back, shifting the blow's destination and reducing the damage as much as possible. Next, she went for a middle kick — feint — a high kick. Prepared for the worst, I raised my arm to block. If I took that hit, it would knock me out. I couldn't let that happen. I needed to block it, no matter the cost.

As she whaled on me, I slipped in low kicks in retaliation. I could hear them landing, but Chinatsu's expression didn't shift even a fraction. Apparently she had decided to ignore them.

Our short-range combat continued. Any time I tried to back up, she would close in again, ensuring all of her attacks were within range. It was clear she was planning to simply endure any blows I landed in return.

Another high kick — no, a middle, I misread—

Then I took the hardest hit yet.

"Gah!"

Pain — shot through me — my rib — did it break? *I can't take another hit!*

I could see her start to throw out another kick. Middle? High? Feint or no feint? If I took a high kick, I was done for, but even a middle kick would be hard to endure.

What now? What do I do?

"STOP!"

...Huh? It's over? Did I lose?

For a split-second, my mind went blank. I glanced around,

struggling to think. Then, at last, I realized that three minutes had passed, and thus, the first round had ended.

I walked back to my side and sat down in the chair provided to me.

"Want some water?! Or a towel?! I've got one right here!" Aoki babbled from somewhere behind me.

"Water."

He held the bottle up to my lips, but I snatched it away and drank from it myself.

When I heard the word "stop," part of me immediately wondered if I'd lost. This said a lot about my current state of mind.

Each break would only last one minute. How many seconds had passed? It was almost time for the next round. In less than sixty seconds, I'd have to get up and walk back to the battlefield. Time flew by so quickly here, and yet it lasted an eternity there...

I don't want to fight. It hurts. I'm scared. I... can't win...?

At this point, I couldn't have returned to the arena without some ray of hope.

"Don't force yourself, Yui. If it's too risky, we can call it off."

I jumped to my feet. "Hyah!"

"Aagh!"

My elbow slammed into him and sent him stumbling a short distance. *Don't be such a baby! You're making me look like a gorilla or something!*

How did he do that? He spoke up at the exact perfect time and got me motivated again. Almost like my body was moving on autopilot before my brain could catch up. I couldn't stand it.

"Combatants, take your marks!"

At the judge's voice, I raised my hand in Aoki's direction.

"Be back soon."

"Go get 'em!"

We exchanged a high-five.

In the second round, Chinatsu was just as aggressive. Forward punches, body kicks. Low, middle, high kicks. She was like a whirlwind, whipping around the arena, and it took everything I had to slip in a few punches and low kicks of my own in between.

As for the third and fourth rounds, they went pretty much the same way.

This was now my fourth break, and I was struggling to breathe. My whole body was probably in a lot of pain, too, but I was numb to it by this point. Part of me was amazed I was still able to move at all.

"This is kind of insane..."

"I thought this was going to be, like, a casual match..."

"So hardcore!"

"At this point, I don't care who wins!"

"Keep it up, girls!"

Meanwhile, Aoki was doing his best to mop up my sweat with a towel, but it still wasn't enough.

"Yui... This is just a casual school event, remember?"

No. This is a duel. To us, at least.

Talent... Effort... Dreams... Pride... So many things were riding on this fight.

"Combatants, take your marks!"

My body felt so leaden, I wasn't sure I'd even be able to stand up.

"Win or lose, this is the final round," I told him confidently. And with that, I slowly rose to my feet. *Thank god.* Apparently my legs could still support my weight, which meant I could still fight.

"You can always forfeit, you know," Chinatsu called before the start of the fifth round. She still regarded me as her opponent, but I could see a hint of mercy in her expression.

"What, are you scared I'll win again? You never could beat me," I countered, hoping to bolster my morale.

"We'll see about that," she shot back flatly, her shoulders heaving.

She had to be exhausted from all that attacking... but the damage she'd inflicted was far greater. Meanwhile, I had barely landed *any* solid hits.

"BEGIN!"

Chinatsu charged straight at me; I put some distance between us. I couldn't think about strategy any longer. All I could do was let my body move on autopilot.

And yet, although I was too tired to plan my moves, for some reason, my brain was stuck on something else. Chinatsu was right — I couldn't be sure she wouldn't beat me. After all, in the time since she moved away, she had invested far more time in karate than I had.

Right kick, left kick, right punch, one after another. I barely managed to get in a low kick, but the foot I was using was starting to hurt.

Every single one of Chinatsu's attacks was an attempt to finish me. Each of them was a message: *I'm not playing around.*

Some people devoted their *entire lives* to their craft, while others devoted, eh, however much they felt like. People of the former category might judge those in the latter category, and vice versa. Their priorities were different. And I could understand how infuriating it would be if someone assumed they could beat you because of it, even though they didn't know the whole story.

But just because someone didn't devote their whole life to one single thing, it didn't automatically mean they didn't take their life seriously. Maybe they were devoted to a lot of different stuff at once. Maybe some things were equally as important as others. A single duel did not determine the value of everything.

Right! Left! Knee strike! Chinatsu's onslaught was unending. She was trying her best to end this. I slipped in a low kick.

Kicking her used to feel like kicking a tree trunk, but now every time I landed one, she pulled her leg back slightly.

Was she... flinching?

I wanted to beat her in this duel, fair and square. I refused to use my lack of time investment as an excuse. Obviously winning wasn't everything, but at the same time, winning would prove to her just how committed I was. And I wanted her to see that.

She threw out a right hook aimed at my shoulder — an overswing. Meanwhile, in the same instant, I jumped. The whole world slowed to a crawl.

We had been fighting for nearly fifteen full minutes; I couldn't begin to count how many punches and kicks we'd performed thus far. But there was one attack I hadn't tried, and Chinatsu had probably noticed its absence by now. Maybe she thought I couldn't use it, or maybe she thought I was holding back. But in actuality, I was waiting for the perfect time to summon all of my strength and speed to land it.

My high jump kick.

Aimed at the head, it was a knockout blow, and I had been waiting and waiting to use it.

Chinatsu's legs weren't moving. She was unable to dodge. So I unleashed my ultimate weapon straight at her — *I'm sorry!*

"Not gonna work!"

My foot struck her left arm. She blocked the hit. I felt a chill in my chest, but I ignored it. All I had to do was break through her guard.

Sparks flew as leg bone collided with arm bone... and then...

"RAAAAAAAAAHHH!"

...she knocked me away with a right front kick.

The crowd gasped. Even *they* could tell that my ultimate attack had failed. And they all probably figured I was toast.

"You're done," Chinatsu declared.

It was such a climactic moment, I couldn't blame them for thinking the battle was over.

“You can do it, Yui!”



No... There was still one person who believed in me. I couldn't give up yet. It was Aoki who taught me to always keep trying.

I landed another low kick. Her left leg shrank back... but in exchange, she plowed her fist into my side. I resisted the urge to puke and tossed out another low kick. Again, her leg pulled away... and then she struck back with a high kick. My arms were now too numb to defend me anymore.

Nevertheless, I threw out another low kick.

Murmurs rose up from the crowd as I tried and tried to brute-force my way to victory, slamming my right leg into her left. I heard it connect — and yet her leg didn't move a muscle. Her expression didn't shift.

Then she stepped forward to attack... and her face twisted in pain. A moment later, her left leg gave out, almost like she'd tripped. Unable to support her own weight, she went down like a sack of potatoes.

Sure enough, my attacks had landed after all. She had simply tried to act like they didn't.

I had kicked, kicked, kicked my way to the upper hand. It wasn't the coolest or most efficient strategy — if anything, it was downright boring, and to some, it might have even looked like cheating. But sparring wasn't about looking cool all the time.

The battle, however, wasn't over yet. Right before Chinatsu's knees touched the ground, she sprang back up again. The look in her eyes said *I'm not going down here. I've earned this win.*

Once your leg gives out, it takes a lot to summon your strength again. She was truly tough, and part of me was terrified to think of what she might hit me with if I failed to finish her off. Not only that, but she was keeping her stance low, so she'd be able to block pretty much any of my normal attacks... and in terms of raw strength, she had the advantage...

So I jumped again.

I put my left foot on her right knee like I was using it as a springboard.

This caught her entirely off-guard. She hadn't predicted what would happen next.

Pressing down hard with my left foot, I swung my right foot up toward the sky... toward her jaw.

This move was called a shining wizard, popularized by Yaegashi Taichi's favorite spectator sport, pro wrestling. He'd taught me about it a while ago when we watched one of his DVDs together... and today, I finally got to try it out.

A shining high kick.

Honestly, nine times out of ten, Chinatsu could probably beat me handily. She hadn't wasted her life. But I hadn't wasted mine, either. And this was proof of that.

My right foot connected with her jaw, sending her straight to dreamland. KO.

Winner: Kiriama Yui/Aoki Yoshifumi
Total Flowers: 10

~Uwa Chihiro/Enjouji Shino VS Yaegashi Taichi/Inaba Himeko VS Setouchi Kaoru/Shiroyama Shouto~

Out of nowhere, the opportunity I had waited for finally manifested itself.

Given their talents, I knew they would make it pretty far in this tournament. Thus, as long as we kept winning, I was confident we'd run into each other eventually... and yet when the moment finally came, I wasn't quite expecting it.

With this, we had the right to challenge our senpai. To fight them head-on.

"You guys should join in too," Inaba Himeko had called out to us as we passed by. Turns out, they had been looking for opponents.

And so we ended up in a battle against the pair I wanted to beat most of all: Inaba Himeko and Yaegashi Taichi. I couldn't have asked for more.

Ever since we joined the Cultural Research Club, Enjouji and I had tried our best to be like our senpai. It was our dream to be on their level. Not that we wanted to be *exactly* like them, but... we wanted to scratch the surface, ideally before they left the club for good. Otherwise that tangible goal would fade into illusion and we'd never get another chance to seize it.

To make matters worse, we would soon be the oldest students in the club. What would our kouhai think if the club was run by a couple of losers who couldn't compete with their forerunners?

We needed to beat them, just once.

Six desks were pushed up against each other to create a long table. Sitting on my desk was a pile of playing cards — the hand I was dealt.

On my left was Enjouji. Next to her was Inaba Himeko, then Yaegashi Taichi, then Setouchi Kaoru, then Shiroyama Shouto. This was yet another three-way battle.

At first the four of them were going to battle each other, but every time Inaba suggested a battle format, Setouchi staunchly refused, claiming Inaba was “clearly plotting something!” (It was the right call, in my opinion.) Thus, they drew a challenge from the Battle Box: Pair Poker. Poker, however, was best played in a large group... and right as they were debating whether to redraw, Enjouji and I happened to walk by.

So there I was, sitting at a desk and waiting to receive the rest of my cards.

Before the battle, I had told Enjouji in no uncertain terms that I wanted to win. If we could win this, we would prove to ourselves that we were just as good as our senpai... or at least, we *could* be. And with that confidence, we would have the strength to carve our own path forward.

That, and the idea of finally beating them was just really appealing on its own.

"I already know the rules, but would anyone else like a refresher?" asked Setouchi once she finished dealing out the cards. Her short hair gave her a no-nonsense vibe, but the piercings glittering in her ears suggested otherwise.

"Y-Yes, please! If you could explain the basics — ack!" As Enjouji raised her hand, she nearly dropped her cards.

Please get it together.

"Okay, I'll explain it," said Taichi. "Where would you like me to start?"

"The very beginning... Um, but I'd prefer to ask someone else. If you're the one explaining it, I won't be able to concentrate. Because of your voice."

"Alright then. I guess someone else will have to do it." Even Taichi had grown numb to her bizarre voice fetish.

"The goal is to create combinations of cards, known as a 'hand,' using the ones you're dealt. Make a strong hand, and you'll win all the chips that were bet on that round. Rinse and repeat," explained Shiroyama, a friendly and charming third-year who struck me as the popular type.

He was in the jazz band; and incidentally, he and Setouchi were dating. Since Taichi and Inaba were also a couple, that made me and Enjouji... No, no, no way. But if anyone saw us right now, they might mistakenly think we were together, too.

"First, each participant's gotta bet some chips. This is called an ante," Shiroyama continued as he set two chips in the center of the table with a *clack*. "Next, you look at your five cards and decide whether to raise your bet, bet the same as everyone else, or drop out. If you stay in, you have to match your bet to everyone else's."

Enjouji nodded pensively as she listened.

"Once everyone's agreed on the amount we want to bet, you have the chance to discard whatever cards you don't want and draw an equal amount of new cards to replace

them. Then you look at your new hand and decide if you want to raise your bet. Or if you feel like you probably won't win, you can decide to drop out."

"I see. So it takes some strategy."

"The participants who don't drop out all show each other their cards, and the person with the strongest hand gets all the chips in the pot. Here's a table of all the different hands in order of strongest to weakest."

So far, these rules were in line with regular five draw poker.

"But in our case, we also have the pair element. So every time you want to decide whether to raise your bet or drop out, you have to do so as a pair. Then each pair will play all ten of their cards at once. So you never know what cards might actually come in handy."

"Sounds like there's a lot of potential for strong hands and dramatic comebacks," Taichi mused.

With these special rules, the element of chance would play an even greater role than usual. Perhaps Enjouji's beginner's luck would come in clutch.

"Each pair gets 50 chips to start with; the pair that has the most chips at the end of the time limit wins. Or, if the other players run out of chips completely, the game will end. Any other questions?"

"Let's set a rule that players aren't allowed to show their cards to their partner under any circumstances," Inaba added. You'd think I'd be used to her voice by now, and yet it made me tense. "And as I'm sure we can agree, any team caught cheating will lose automatically."

And so the list of rules had been expanded. I could easily understand why, though. After all, you could easily tell each other your cards if you came up with some kind of code. More importantly, however, the second rule — *any team caught cheating will lose automatically* — made it sound like you were *allowed* to cheat as long as you *didn't* get caught.

"Alright then, shall we get started?" Setouchi called.

At this, Inaba's lip curled in a tiny, almost imperceptible smirk.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," I muttered to Enjouji. Would someone like Inaba Himeko really fight fair if her odds were merely 50-50?

"Yeah... We should be cautious, Chihiro-kun."

And so the battle began.

"Ooh, it's starting!"

"Finally!"

"Whoever wins this battle will get everyone's flowers, so they'll end up with... what, 40 or so?"

"Go for it, Uwa!"

"Enjouji-san!"

An audience had gathered in the classroom with us, many of them fellow second-years. From the looks of it, a lot of them were former competitors.

"If the second-years win this, it'll be a real underdog story!"

"At this point, they've made it to the top ten!"

"Show them what the CRCIFIT is made of, you two!"

"Wait... Fujishima-san, I thought you said we were supposed to keep a low profile!"

Apparently Fujishima Maiko was among them... not that it mattered right now. I looked at my cards. Right off the bat, I had a three of a kind (sevens). And factoring in Enjouji's cards, we could possibly end up with a full house or even a four of a kind.

As for Enjouji herself, she was looking down at her cards in bewilderment.

"Look, I know this is a lot, but quit looking around like that. They'll think you're cheating."

"Since we're going first, we'll start things off with... this." Shiroyama slid a stack of three chips over. This raised the bet to five chips total.

"Now it's our turn. I figure we should call the bet. You're cool with that, right?" I asked Enjouji. She nodded, so I slid

three of our chips over.

"In that case, we'll kick things up a notch," said Inaba as she added *five* chips — two more than Shiroyama. "You don't mind, right, Taichi? I should've asked sooner."

"Nah, works for me," he nodded.

Because all of our bets needed to match, the rest of us were now forced to either put in more chips or drop out entirely.

"Okay then... Let's call it," said Setouchi.

"Sure," said Shiroyama.

They had chosen to continue with the hand.

"Then I guess we'd better call it, too."

"A-Are you sure? Don't you think Taichi-senpai and Inaba-senpai probably have a super good hand?"

"They don't know each other's cards, same as us," I argued as I put in two more chips for a total of seven.

"You sure you don't want to re-raise?" Inaba asked. But she wasn't speaking as our affable senpai — she was treating us as the enemy, proof that she was taking this competition seriously.

"...Not on our first try, no."

"Keep talking like that and you'll never win, you know."

I felt a twinge in my chest.

Then it was time to discard our cards, starting with Setouchi. When my turn came, I discarded two and drew two new ones: a king of clubs and a jack of hearts. I couldn't immediately use them for anything, but they were both strong cards in their own right. Plus, I saw Enjouji discard a two of hearts and a five of spades, so in theory, it was possible she now had a king or jack in her own hand, too. Or maybe she had the fourth seven, which would give us a four of a kind.

"We're going to check." Evidently Setouchi/Shiroyama had no intention of raising.

And as for us...

"Do you think we should raise?"

"I... don't know... I can't really tell if what I have is good or bad..."

She made it sound like she had at least *one* set. In which case...

I bet two more chips.

"That's it?" Inaba snorted.

"You raised by two last time!"

"Why are you so focused on me, hmm?"

"Wha...?" I started to argue back, but stopped. I couldn't let myself get distracted.

Inaba seemed to be hassling us pretty aggressively... If anything, wouldn't that suggest that *she* was overly focused on *us*?

"Okay then, our turn," Inaba shrugged, and casually added twenty more chips—

"What?!"

"Huh?!"

"Oh my god!"

Two stacks of ten. The sight had us all agog. Even the crowd was murmuring. Their bet was now at 27.

"Th-This just turned into a huge bet all of a sudden..."

"She must have a really good hand..."

"You don't mind, right, Taichi? Probably should've asked sooner."

"Nah, works for me."

Considering he didn't know what cards she had, you'd think he would've been at least a little flustered, and yet he was perfectly calm.

"Your turn," said Inaba as she gestured to Setouchi/Shiroyama.

"Wh-What do we do, Shiroyama-kun?"

"Uhhhh..."

They were still struggling to process what had happened.

"...I think it's a little early to be betting that high. I know we've already put in seven, but..."

"Nah, you're right. Let's cut our losses and fold. We can

always make it up later.”

And so they dropped out of the round. They would lose the seven chips they put into the pot, but Setouchi didn't sound worried.

“Okay then. Chihiro, Shino, what about you?”

She had merely called our names, and yet it felt like she was crushing us. Was it their raw power that made me feel this way? Or just the pressure of a live audience? All eyes were on us, watching our every move. I could barely swallow.

Stay calm! Assess the situation!

Team Inaba had bet 27 chips. It was a huge gamble that would possibly cost them more than half of their starting amount — a critical victory for whoever won it.

Team Setouchi had folded, sacrificing seven chips. And if we folded, that was another nine chips... which meant Team Inaba would receive those 16 chips for free.

Assuming we let them, of course.

Part of me wondered if this was Inaba's strategy. Intimidate us, make us drop out, then take the pot without actually having to compete for it. It certainly sounded like something she'd do.

It didn't look like Inaba and Taichi had found some underhanded method of telling each other their cards. Sure, they were exchanging glances here and there, but they weren't mind readers. They were in the same boat as us.

Don't let them scare you! Nothing ventured, nothing gained!

“...You wanna do it?”

“O-Okay,” Enjouji nodded, albeit timidly. “W-We gotta try sometime.”

Or else we'll never beat them.

“Alright, you're on.” I added more chips to match their bet of 27.

“Whoa!”

“They're going for it!”

“This is so exciting!”

The crowd cheered. I could only imagine how much fun they were having, watching this unfold from the sidelines.

"Interesting. Are you trying to play to the audience?"

Inaba sounded surprised. Just as I thought — she hadn't expected me to call her bluff.

"No, I'm just trying to win," I replied.

It felt so good to say that. My heart raced. *We can win! I know it! Luck is on our side!*

At last, it was time to reveal our hands.

Me and Enjouji: full house. Taichi and Inaba: straight flush.

Just like that, their chip count swelled to 84. Conversely, we had lost 27 of our chips; only 23 remained. Even if we bet everything on the next round, we still couldn't quite make up for what we lost.

The game wasn't over yet... but to us, it felt like we were fighting a losing battle.

"Chihiro-kun, I think we should... what's the word? Match it. Er, call it."

"Sure," I replied halfheartedly.

There were no other big bets after the first one; from there, everyone stuck to five or six chips. Team Setouchi won a round, and then Team Inaba won again. Meanwhile, our chips dwindled and dwindled. We were now in a distant third place.

The audience had dwindled, too. They must have figured the winner was obvious, so they decided to go check out the other battles. As for our second-year supporters, they watched on with pity in their eyes.

"Chihiro-kun... What do we do...?"

"...Let's just stay in again."

Why did we keep losing? It felt like we were completely set up in the first round. Did we walk into their trap?

Inaba had made some risky decisions. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but how was Taichi able to sit there like it was no big deal? They didn't know each other's hands... or

did they? Could they be cheating? No, surely I would have noticed by now if they were. But if not that, then what? The *power of love* or something? Give me a break.

Inaba and Taichi looked at each other, nodded, then turned back to the game. Both of them oozed confidence.

"I... I don't think we're gonna win this..."

"...Well, we gotta try, right?"

We stood nothing to gain from backing down. We were basically desperate at this point. Was it possible to communicate telepathically in real life?

This round, all three teams revealed their hands.

Setouchi and Shiroyama: three of a kind. Taichi and Inaba: two pair. Me and Enjouji: flush. We had earned nine chips, bringing us back up to 17.

At last, we had pulled off a win, and now we were hanging by a thread. Unfortunately, we had won the round with the least amount of chips in the pot.

"All going to plan," said Inaba.

"Yep," said Taichi.

They knew we would win? Is that why they didn't bet higher? Could they read our cards somehow?

"W-We won! Chihiro-kun, we won!" Enjouji exclaimed, overjoyed. Then she retrieved our winnings and started to stack them up — "Ack!" — only to knock them over.

You never learn, do you?

"Dude, get a grip."

"S-Sorry... It's just... We finally won..."

"Look how far behind we are. It's not gonna help much."

"Okay, but we still won!"

"I mean... yeah..."

Enjouji seemed so wimpy, and yet every now and then she really put her foot down. How many other people at our school knew that about her? Honestly, I probably knew her the best out of everyone. Not that this was particularly exciting.

But if we were so close... maybe if we just looked into

each other's eyes...?

"Looks like it's our turn to deal the cards," said Shiroyama.

"Gimme some good ones this time," Inaba joked. She didn't sound worried in the least.

After everyone had received their new cards, I looked at Enjouji. She noticed me looking, and our eyes met. She had such large, clear eyes; the inky depths of her pupils seemed to shine brighter than any jewel, almost like I could see through to her pure heart. Surely I could find something in that shine... somewhere...

"Hey Enjouji... Can you feel it?"

"...Yeah."

You're kidding me, right?

"Wait, what?" She blinked.

That's what I thought.

"Yeah, I figured. You can't tell what cards I have, nor can you read my mind."

"Nope. I'm not psychic."

No mere human could ever know what another person was thinking. You could make an educated guess based on their expression of emotions, but even then, you wouldn't magically have X-ray vision to see their cards. You couldn't communicate with plain old eye contact.

"And this probably applies to Taichi-senpai and Inaba-senpai, too," Enjouji mused.

Sometimes she could pick up my hints, but that was the most she could reasonably achieve. So how did those two know they would win in the first round...?

Wait a minute.

For a moment, I imagined what would have happened if we'd won that round. Something told me Inaba and Taichi would have kept acting confident regardless.

It felt as though a veil had been lifted.

"You know... maybe we're overthinking this."

"I think I get what you're saying, Chihiro-kun."

All this time, we'd convinced ourselves that we could never compare to them. But maybe they weren't actually that perfect. Maybe we should have given ourselves a little more credit.

"It's not about being better than them. We can win this, Enjouji. Are you with me?"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

The third-years all stared at us dubiously. But Inaba was starting to look cautious.

After the first round of bets, we all put in four chips for a total of 12 in the pot. Then it was time to discard our unwanted cards and go for the next betting round. Taichi and Inaba went first.

"Eh... I'd say this is about where we're at," Inaba muttered as she added an extra chip.

Let the games begin.

"Is that all?" I asked condescendingly.

"Excuse me?" She glared back. *Yikes.*

"We'll call. One more chip."

"Shiroyama-san, what are you so afraid of?"

"Afraid...?"

"What happened to respecting your senpai, Chihiro? You trying to start something?"

But I ignored Inaba and checked with Enjouji. Our eyes met. I was confident we were on the same page... but I couldn't read her mind perfectly, of course. Was this the right timing? No one could know for sure. Therefore...

"G-Go for it, Chihiro-kun!"

With her encouragement, I added all 13 chips we had left, for a total bet of 17. Shiroyama, Setouchi, and Taichi all looked shocked. Inaba, however, looked disgruntled. Meanwhile, the crowd started to whisper:

"Oh man, they're going for it!"

"Finally, another big gamble!"

"Are they sure they wanna do that?!"

"The CRCIFIT never ceases to amaze!"

I could understand their surprise. But Enjouji had given me her blessing, and she didn't look worried. As it turned out, if you warned your partner about your big bets in advance, they wouldn't bat an eye.

Our cards were locked in. All that remained was for the others to decide whether they would rise to our challenge.

"What'll it be, Inaba-san?"

Thus far, Inaba had called all the shots while Taichi sat back and let her. But now, for the first time, she was hesitating.

"You can talk to Taichi-san if you want to, you know."

Now that the spell was broken, there was no need for them to maintain the illusion. They acted like they could read minds, like they knew each other's cards, like they were in control of this game... but that was just Inaba's ploy to scare us.

"I gotta say, I'm impressed the way you two can act like you know you're going to win, then turn around and actually win. It's very cool."

Indeed, my senpai were the coolest kids around.

"But in the end, that's all it really is, isn't it?"

THUMP. That was the sound of me dragging them back down to my level. Now my goal was within my reach... and I could see the path forward. All I had to do now was start walking.

"Y-You know, Chihiro-kun... it feels like we've caught up to them somehow!"

Was it safe to think that way? Honestly, the two of us were still a little off-track. But at least we were headed in the right direction.

"You're on."

Inaba called our bet and put in 12 more chips. If she backed down, she would have had to forfeit the five chips she had already put in. And if Team Setouchi folded, we would stand to gain 27 chips in total, putting us back on track to potentially win the battle. But if they wanted to stay

in, that was fine with me. All I had to do was win, and we'd close the gap.

Why hadn't I gotten more aggressive? It felt like I'd been put on a short leash this whole time. Sure, it was great to have lofty ambitions, but you had to keep a level head and look at reality. No one on earth was permanently beyond reach.

"Welp. Looks like there's no backing down now."

"You realize if you lose, you're out of the game, right?"

"Yeah, but who says we're going to lose?" *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* "We're going to beat you at *some* point before you graduate, you know."

"We, huh?" Inaba smirked.

"Y-Yeah! Both of us!" Enjouji chimed in. Coming from her, it was a rare declaration of war.

"I look forward to it," said Taichi.

Inaba whirled around and kicked him in the shin. "Don't encourage them!"

At last, they were starting to act like themselves again.

"Uh, guys?! We're still here, you know! And we're staying in!" said Setouchi as she added her chips. The crowd cheered.

"Yeah!"

"They're really doing it!"

"Go for it!"

Total chips in the pot: 51. There was no strategy left — now it would all come down to luck. If we won, we would surpass Team Setouchi as the runner-up to win. If Team Setouchi won, we would drop out of the game, and they'd go head-to-head with Team Inaba. And if on the off-chance Team Inaba won, it was safe to say the entire battle was theirs.

It was time to reveal our cards.

Setouchi and Shiroyama: three of a kind. Taichi and Inaba: four of a kind. Me and Enjouji: full house.

...Apparently the CRC third-years' OP protagonist luck

hadn't run out just yet. But one of these days, we'd make up for the year we spent chasing after them. All we had to do was believe in ourselves.

*Winner: Yaegashi Taichi/Inaba Himeko
Total Flowers: 46*

~Yaegashi Taichi/Inaba Himeko VS Kiriya Yui/Aoki Yoshifumi VS Nakayama Mariko/Ishikawa Daiki~

That last battle was a close one, Taichi thought to himself as he heaved a sigh of relief.

Their strategy was simple: In the first or second round, if they got decent cards, they'd make a big gamble. If they won, they would dominate their opponents. Same if their opponents folded. If they lost, they'd make up for it with another big gamble. If they lost twice in a row, it simply meant luck wasn't on their side. Lastly, they would act as though they understood each other completely. That way they could maintain the upper hand throughout the battle.

But in the end, this strategy didn't work on Chihiro and Enjouji, who saw right through it. Perhaps it was only a matter of time until their two kouhai beat them. Ultimately, however, he and Himeko reigned victorious.

"We're up to 46 flowers now, huh?"

There were so many fake flowers in his arms, he was practically holding a bouquet. Or maybe it *literally* was a bouquet, since they had to tie them together with a rubber band to carry them at all.

"If everyone else is going at around the same pace, then we're looking at, what — six, seven pairs left?"

On the one hand, it felt like a miracle that they'd made it this far, but on the other hand, he could feel himself starting to get greedy. Just a little farther, and they'd be Yamaboshi's

best couple. Setting aside the prize (as well as his own modesty), part of him really wanted to see what it was like to come in first place.

“Taichi! Inabacchan!” called a familiar voice. They turned to see Aoki waving at them eagerly, carrying his own bouquet of fake flowers. Beside him stood Kiriyama. Though she was smiling, she looked dead tired, like she’d just finished running a marathon.

Naturally, he and Himeko walked over.

“Are you two slacking off? You’ve got fewer flowers than I’d expect you to have at this stage,” Himeko commented.

“We’re not slacking, I swear! Real talk, our last battle was crazy intense, so we kinda needed a break...”

“And by ‘we,’ I’m guessing you mean Kiriyama?” Taichi asked.

“C’mon, man, don’t embarrass me! If people find out I sat back and let Yui do all the fighting, I’m gonna look like a—!”

“Ooh, is a battle starting?”

“CRC all-stars match! Let’s gooooo!”

As if coming out of the woodwork, other students noticed the two teams talking and started to gather around. Now that almost all of the participants had been eliminated from the tournament, they didn’t have anything better to do. Himeko, however, was quick to set the record straight.

“Wait, wait, wait. Nobody said anything about a battle, alright? Nothing against these two, but they don’t have nearly as many flowers as we do. They need to go battle some other team in order to catch up.”

“HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!” shouted a loud voice as a girl with high pigtails ran out from the crowd. It was Nakayama Mariko, the most energetic girl in school. “If you guys are gonna battle, then you gotta count us in! C’mon, Ishikawa-kun, get out here!”

At this, Nakayama’s partner Ishikawa lumbered out from the crowd. “I wouldn’t say they *have* to include us.”

“You’re not listening. I just said we’re not—”

“Oh, Nakayama-chan! I didn’t realize you were still in the tournament. And look at all those flowers you got!”

“We just won a huge four-way battle, so yeah, we’ve got a whole bunch now. I heard about your karate battle, Yui-chan! Everybody’s saying it was the most exciting part of this whole tournament!”

“Taichi, let’s slip away while they’re distracted.”

“O-Okay... I feel like Nakayama has enough flowers for us to battle her, though...”

“Inaba-san! Yaegashi-kun! Don’t! Stop!”

“You hear that? ‘Don’t stop.’ Let’s go.”

“No! I mean STAY, dang it! See, when we drew from the Battle Box, we got one that said ‘limited to real couples only,’ but we haven’t checked what it is yet.”

“So what?”

“So why don’t we do it with all the *real couples* standing right here?!”

“Pass,” Himeko shot back flatly. “We just finished a risky three-way battle. And for all I know, you could be setting us up. No deal.”

“I’m not! If you want proof, you can ask my opponents from the last battle — Huhwha?”

As they argued, more and more spectators gathered until the three pairs were completely surrounded. Some people had even brought lawn chairs.

“We’re at fifty and counting,” Taichi whispered nervously.

“E-Even *you* can’t get out of this one, Inaba-san!”

“Tsk... Fine, whatever. Now that Nakayama’s starting to get nervous, maybe it won’t be so hard to win this...”

“Uhhh, are you forgettin’ me and Yui, or...?”

“I heard that, Inaba-san! You’re going down! Our battle format will be” — Nakayama unfolded the piece of paper — “a Love Pageant! ...Wait, what does *that* mean?!”

Rules:

Losers will be determined by KO or forfeit.

If the crowd calls your submission into question, you will be disqualified.

If no winner has been chosen within the fifteen-minute time limit, the crowd will decide by majority vote.

Taichi had no problem with these guidelines. It was the “submissions” part that he wasn’t excited about. He really didn’t want to have to do this, but if he wanted to win the tournament, it was a trial he would have to endure.

After a quick ghost leg lottery, it was determined that Taichi would go first. He stood in the center of the courtyard, surrounded by nearly a hundred students cheering him on. The spotlight was on him.

“I’m in a relationship with Inaba Himeko, and... I call her by her first name, Himeko. She really hates it when people call her that, but because I’m her boyfriend, she makes a special exception for me only.”

“Oooh,” the crowd murmured.

That’s all I get?

He needed to take this a step further.

“So from now on, the only person on this earth who will ever call her Himeko... is *me!*”

“*Oooohhh!*” The crowd cheered and applauded.

Taichi was already breathing hard from the exhaustion. The other participants were trembling in fear.

Their “submissions”: embarrassing couple stories to be shared in front of the entire crowd (nothing R-rated allowed)!

“Is this really exciting enough for a semi-final...? Well, the crowd *does* seem excited... Man, I just know Fujishima’s the one who came up with this...!”

After all, the entire rulebook was written in her handwriting.

Just then, he thought he heard a sneeze in the distance. *Nah, there’s no way that silly cliché actually happens in real life.*

“You’re pretty good, Yaegashi-kun,” Nakayama murmured,

swallowing hard as she wiped the sweat from her brow.

"Who the hell came up with this?! It doesn't even explain how the winner is determined!" Himeko raged, her face beet-red. But it wasn't just anger that was heating her up.

"Nakayama, you're next. Are you prepared? I'm guessing you'll need to submit something on par with Yaegashi's entry or the crowd won't accept it," Ishikawa told her, looking both concerned and somewhat grim. It was rare to see him outwardly oppose anything.

"Who's next?!"

"C'mon, get real mushy!"

"Or maybe just get a room!"

The crowd was enjoying this a little too much for Taichi's liking.

"It's my turn," Nakayama declared. Then she cleared her throat and continued, "Well, you see, I'm in a relationship with Ishikawa-kun, and... lately we've been going on dates at the park. And I've been making little picnic lunches to take with us, right? See, I'm pretty good at Japanese food, and I want my boyfriend to enjoy my cooking, so I usually make stew or stir-fry. It's nothing special; 90 percent of everything I cook is the same brown color... but Ishikawa-kun still tells me it tastes good, so... Heehee..."

"Humblebrag!"

"Yeah! You're just bragging!"

It was a humblebrag, but it clearly got a reaction out of the audience, so by that metric, Nakayama had passed with flying colors.

Next up, Kiriya.

"This might be the turning point for the whole battle," Himeko murmured as she stood next to Taichi.

"You think she can't do it?" he asked.

"Damn right I don't," she replied.

Kiriya stood front and center, staring at the ground and fidgeting with the hem of her gym shirt.

"I'm in a relationship with Aoki, and... well, for one thing

he's really stupid, and not very manly. He's tall, but in a beanpole kind of way, and he's stupid, and clumsy..."

"Y-You already said the stupid part," Aoki whimpered quietly.

"But when we're alone, he can be really cool... and sweet... so yeah... I don't know how other people feel about him, but... I love him."

"SHO KYUUUTE!!!" the crowd squealed.

Kiriyama's face was on fire as she shrank into herself, like she was trying to disappear. Admittedly it *was* rather cu—"Ouch!"

"Don't start swooning for some other guy's girlfriend! Yours is right here!"

"...Could you please quit spying on my internal narration?"

"I'm just saying... I love *you* WAY more than *she* loves *him*," Himeko muttered as she turned her face away sulkily.

"Thank you, Himeko... I love you, too."

Reflexively, he reached out to her—

"Could you guys at least wait your turn to start doing that?" Ishikawa muttered.

"Wha?!" Taichi yelped.

"We weren't *doing* anything," Himeko grumbled.

"Sorry, it was just a thought I had. I'm impressed you can afford to get distracted at a time like this," Ishikawa continued.

"I know, right? Knowing them, they're totally the type to start kissing in the middle of a crowd!" Nakayama remarked.

"No we don't! Only in a dark movie theater at most!" Himeko hissed.

"Again, that's the kind of thing you should tell the *audience*, not us," Ishikawa replied.

"I'm pretty sure the audience would start booing," said Taichi. He was starting to get a little worried, and for more reasons than one.

Meanwhile, Aoki jogged up to take his turn.

“Yui! Thank you so much! That was so sweet, and I... Man, I really love you!”

“Ugh! Stop!”

It was so blunt, the audience cheered and applauded like crazy.

“So pure!”

“So sweet!”

“Living the dream!”

“Hell yeah! Thanks, guys! Get out there and live your dreams, too!” Aoki responded with a smile. This battle format was practically designed with him in mind.

“I’m falling asleep over here. Hurry it up,” Himeko jeered bitterly.

“Alrighty then, here I go!”

Meanwhile, Kiriyama had lost her chance to retreat to the sidelines and was now stuck standing in the middle next to him.

“Okay, uh, what’s something I can tell them... Oh, I know. Whenever we kiss, Yui always—”

“DON’T TELL THEM THAAAAAAAAT!”

“GWAAAAGH! Gppphh!”

Her foot collided with his family jewels, and he collapsed to the ground. KO.

And so Team Kiriyama was eliminated from the battle.

“Nakayama is the first girlfriend I’ve ever had. Therefore, I plan to spend all of my ‘firsts’ with her.”

“M-Me, too, Ishikawa-kun!”

“Awww, they’re each other’s firsts!”

“So innocent!”

“That’s so sweet!”

“I love it!”

In his first one-on-one round, Ishikawa pulled off a faithful, dedicated proclamation of love, and the crowd ate it up. Then, at last, it was Himeko’s turn.

“Himeko, don’t feel pressured to go outside your comfort

zone. No matter what you say, I promise, I won't—"

"Actually, just come with me."

"Huhwha?"

Right when he was trying to send her off, she dragged him along with her to the center of the ring. But even with close to a hundred pairs of eyes on him, he didn't feel nervous. If anything, he was more worried about what kind of stunt *she* was about to pull.

"I'm putting an end to this farce once and for all!"

"Inaba-saaaaan!"

"She's so badass!"

"Why's Yaegashi with her?"

"Listen up, people! As of this very moment, I... I mean, *we*," Himeko called in a loud voice, "are going to kiss!"

"OHHHHHH!"

"But that's R-rated!"

"Are they seriously going to?!"

"*Are we?!*"

All at once, the crowd was ON FIRE. People were dancing, singing, shaking each other — it was pure pandemonium. Then they started chanting:

"KISS! KISS! KISS! KISS!"

Meanwhile, Taichi struggled to think.

"But isn't it against the rules...? Well, maybe not... Kissing is PG-13, I guess..." he mused, ignoring the heat in his cheeks. "Are you sure about this, Himeko?"

Kissing... in front of all these people? Even if they asked everyone not to take any pictures, there was bound to be at least one rule-breaker among them. Those pictures could then get passed around the whole school. This was a huge gamble.

As her boyfriend, he wanted to be supportive... but it was also his duty to protect her from making mistakes.

"Himeko, we don't need to take this risk. We can still win this with our couple stories."

"Dummy. Can't you see? I'm doing this because I *don't*

want to take any risks.”

He didn’t understand what she meant by that, but it was too late; she was already leaning in. He didn’t have time to think. In the background, he could vaguely hear the crowd shrieking, but it all sounded so distant—



“W-We forfeit! WE FORFEIT!”

And so Team Nakayama was eliminated from the battle.

Nakayama stood with her arms crossed in an X shape in front of her chest. Meanwhile, she stared at the ground like she was trying not to cry. Then Ishikawa gently set a hand on her shoulder.

“Whew. Good thing she’s not totally braindead,” Himeko commented, looking relieved, as they returned to their side of the ring. At one point the crowd had started complaining that they “didn’t go all the way,” but she shut them up.

“So basically, you were just bluffing to get Nakayama to forfeit?”

“Well, if the two of us kissed, the two of them would have to do something to surpass it. The crowd would start demanding actions instead of words.”

“They could have waited to forfeit until *after* we kissed, but they didn’t... I guess they felt guilty? Or they knew they’d lose regardless?”

He glanced over at Nakayama, sniffing as Ishikawa consoled her. Knowing her, she must have genuinely sensed that she couldn’t beat them.

“Now we’re up to 112 fake flowers... I imagine the final round is coming up soon.”

“Man, we’ve lasted longer than I thought we would. Who’s still in the tournament?”

“I don’t know, but now that we’ve made it this far, I really want to win. I *need* to win. Originally I was doing it for the prize, but now I feel like we owe it to all the people we eliminated from the tournament.”

Each flower in their possession represented a pair that had lost their battles. As he looked down at the flowers, he could almost feel their hopes and dreams riding on him... This was what it meant to surpass people.

Then, in the distance, they heard it: the footsteps and murmurs of a massive crowd traveling across the athletic

field. They were headed in the direction of the gym... and leading the charge was Nagase Iori and Katori Jouji.

Ten, thirty, fifty, seventy people... The numbers kept rising and rising.

Nagase and Katori carried four bouquets between them — enough flowers to practically bury them — and the dreams they carried were surely innumerable.

“Why do they have a whole army with them?” Himeko snarked, folding her arms.

Then a boy ran over from Nagase’s group to the Love Pageant crowd.

“Nagase and Katori just won a four-way battle, and now they’re looking for whoever’s left in the game!”

“Ah, I see. Then that army of people must be the spectators from that battle... Anyone else picking up the ‘final boss’ vibes, or just me?” Himeko grumbled.

Taichi clenched his fists nervously. Between their flowers and Nagase’s, they must have had close to three hundred. There were no other opponents left in the game. This next battle would decide the winner of the entire tournament.

Meanwhile, Nagase and Katori were smiling like they were having the time of their lives.

Dozens upon dozens of battles had happened today, all leading up to this moment. This was the finale. But no matter whether they won or lost, Taichi wanted to end this tournament on a high note.

But that was when... a third party stepped out from the shadows.

*Winner: Yaegashi Taichi/Inaba Himeko
Total Flowers: 112*

**~Fujishima Maiko/Watase Shingo VS
Yaegashi Taichi/Inaba Himeko VS Nagase
Iori/Katori Jouji~**

The frontrunners: Nagase/Katori. The infamous power couple: Yaegashi/Inaba. These four were about to go head to head... or so they all thought! But lo and behold, Watase and I were still in the running!

Together, we observed the two other pairs from the shadows.

"Let's see... According to my calculations, Yaegashi-kun has 112 flowers, and Nagase-san has 168. That accounts for almost all of the 301 total flowers."

"Which means we've got the last 21... Shouldn't we be disqualified or something?"

"Nonsense! We met the midday quota, so we haven't broken any rules!"

By avoiding risky battles and only taking up challenges we knew we could win, we made it all the way to the top 3!

"Right. We haven't broken any rules — we were just playing strategically! I don't care if everyone else thinks I'm a coward... I'll do whatever it takes to win this with you!"

I was truly delighted to have such a determined partner.

"For the thrilling finale, I've prepared a competition that'll give even the strongest opponents a run for their money! Yes, that's right! I planned this event, directed it, supervised it, and now I'm starring in it!"

"You're a force to be reckoned with, Fujishima-san... I love it!"

Then, finally, Nagase and Katori walked over to Yaegashi and Inaba.

The path we took to get here was by no means an easy one, and now we would face our greatest hurdle yet... but knowing us, we had the strength to persevere.

"Here we go!"

"Hell yeah! I'm with you, no matter what!"

With Watase by my side, I could go the distance.

We ran out from behind the school building and cut through the crowd to the front — to the center of the ring, where the other four stood.

"Just so you know, we're still in the tournament, too!"

And so an unexpected dark horse stormed onto the scene, garnering support as the underdog while single-handedly turning the finale into a fiery three-way match that was sure to... get the crowd... psyched...?

"What? Them?"

"I was watching Yaegashi's battles. He's had a lot of good ones."

"Nagase and the President have been doing incredible, too!"

"The Free-For-All Quiz Show they did at the gym was hilarious!"

Ah, I see. After all those battles, both pairs had earned their fair share of support from the spectators.

"But Fujishima-san..."

"Did they even battle at all?"

"I saw them do a couple of easy battles this morning, but..."

"Yeah... We lost to them a while ago, but the battle itself was really weird..."

Wait, what? Where's our dark horse fanfare?

"There were just so many awesome fights..."

"It just doesn't feel right..."

Apparently the other battles were more exciting than I'd anticipated, leading our audience to prioritize quality over gimmicks. Especially since the majority of them were former participants themselves.

Oh dear. Perhaps it wasn't wise to plan my strategy around battle manga tropes.

This wasn't looking good for us. At this rate, things wouldn't work out the way I'd planned...

"The gap between our flowers is *astronomical*, but whatever. I guess the most efficient choice would be to just let them take part in the battle with us," Inaba sighed.

"Yeah, we might as well," said Yaegashi.

"Yeah, I guess," said Nagase.

"I suppose that's just how it has to be," said Katori.

Almost like they were taking pity on us!

With everyone's eyes on us, I felt like... like... like such a *loser*. But as my spirit teetered on the precipice—

"Don't worry, Fujishima-san... I'm right here with you!" Watase whispered reassuringly.

So I pulled myself together.

"W-Well, let's make the finale a fair fight for everyone. We could add handicaps based on each team's current flower count, for example."

"Wh... Fujishima-san? Are you sure?" Watase asked quietly, clearly concerned.

"We don't have a choice here. Seeing as I helped set up this whole event, people might start to think I cheated my way to the top, and I refuse to let that become the dominant narrative! I don't want to damage the integrity of the tournament itself. It would tarnish everyone's happy memories... I won't let that happen!"

I didn't want anyone to cast aspersions on Watase by association, either.

"...Alright then," he nodded, looking awestruck.

"So, how shall we compete? Ideally it should be something we can all agree to," said Katori.

"Why don't we just draw from the Battle Box? It'd be fair that way," Yaegashi suggested.

"But what if we end up drawing something boring? It'd be a real drag," Inaba commented.

I could tell she was angling for something, but right now, I had no way of stopping her.

"So why don't we—"

"Hey, guys! Why don't we make this conversation loud enough for *everyone* to hear?" Nagase cut in loudly. "We can decide our battle through public debate!"

"...Uhh, sure. I don't see why not."

Naturally, no one was in a position to object, not even Inaba. Nagase had picked the perfect time to interrupt her,

too. In a sense, this battle had already begun.

"We have no problems with that, either," I told them. But because we hadn't earned any public support from the crowd, it would now be even more difficult for us to advocate for ourselves. Was that part of her strategy, or just incidental?

"Okay then, somebody get me a miiiic!" Nagase called out in a singsong voice. A commentator from the Broadcasting Club then brought one over to her.

Instantly, her smile deepened. Call it my female intuition, but I knew she was plotting something.

"Don't—!"

Inaba must have sensed the bad omen, too. She reached out to stop her, but it was too late.

"Hello, everyone! Thanks for hanging in there! This has been one heck of a five-hour marathon, huh?"

Just like that, it felt like Nagase had taken center stage, and the rest of us were merely faceless extras.

"Y'know, for an impromptu event, this turned out to be way more fun than I ever imagined! And I'm sure this year's Sports Festival and Culture Festival are gonna be awesome, too! Big thanks to Fujishima-san for setting it all up!"

Cheers and applause erupted from the crowd. Some even whistled. It almost felt like the tournament was over already; I could feel my competitive spirit deflating.

Only Nagase Iori, the Yamaboshi diva, had the sheer star power to win over an entire crowd of six hundred students.

"We've all had our share of battles. Some of us won and some of us lost. But this tournament was never about winning — the real prize was the memories we made along the way!"

It was such a cheesy line, and yet it felt so apt, I couldn't help but clap.

"Now we need to choose a final winner, and I think everybody should help us out! I mean, it's no fun just *watching*, right?"

“Yeah!” the audience shouted back. All eyes were on her, enraptured. She had them all dancing in the palm of her hand.

“Well then, I say we should put it to a vote! Now let’s go to the gym and give our speeches for the Who Deserves to Win Election!”

And in this day and age, none of us could possibly object to the democratic process.

+++

And so it was that Nagase Iori and Katori Jouji were awarded all 301 flowers, as well as a slapdash “Student Representative Certificate” and a photo shoot with the happy couple. At last, Tanaka-sensei & Hirata-sensei’s Happy Wedding Bouquet Toss (Couples’ Battle Royale) had come to an end.

Some people were less than pleased with this particular outcome:

“Ugh, this sucks. Those two didn’t need any extra help getting into college...”

“Some people get everything handed to them, I swear...”

“They were just born lucky...”

But other than that, everyone seemed to accept it.

All three pairs received an equal amount of time to give their speeches about why they deserved to win, but to be frank, Nagase had won the battle the second this particular format was chosen — or rather, the second someone handed her a mic.

Admittedly, Taichi was a little disappointed he lost, but at the same time, he wasn’t that surprised. After all, Nagase and Katori had magnetic charm, influence, and the sheer talent needed to win dozens upon dozens of battles. And it was only natural that the students they beat would want them to win.

In the end, it kinda felt like the victory had been stolen

from them without any actual competition, but he couldn't pretend it didn't make sense, since Nagase and Katori had acquired the most flowers anyway. That, and the school had required the event to end at a specific time, so they had to wrap things up fairly quick.

Now that the Battle Royale had come to an end, the students all worked together to tidy everything up. As Taichi folded up the gym mats lying out on the athletic field, he reveled in the post-event high. The scarlet sunset signaled the end of another hectic day.

"Yaegashi, people are talking about having a wrap party with the rest of our class. Want to come?" Katori asked.

"Sure, I'll go. You know, you really don't have to help us clean. You're the VIP here."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Katori laughed wryly. "Anyway, be sure to invite Inaba, will you? Oh, and Fujishima, too."

"Wait a minute... You're just scared to ask her yourself because she's depressed!"

"Yes, well, I'm the VIP, remember?" he grinned, deftly using Taichi's own words against him. "Anyway, see you later."

And with that, he walked off. Taichi looked around.

There was a lone figure leaning against the fence, gazing out at the sunset. It was Fujishima Maiko, the main organizer and number one proponent of this event.

"It seems Lady Luck simply wasn't on my side... Will I forever be a wallflower...?" she sighed.

"Don't you think that's a little melodramatic?" Taichi retorted before he could stop himself.

"Well, well. If it isn't the infamous Yaegashi-kun. Where's your precious Himeko-nyan?"

"*Wow*. And here I was, actually worried about you for a minute!"

"Relax, I'm just messing with you. While I *am* a little depressed, I understand that life simply isn't that easy. I

really did want to win, though.”

“Yeah, you seemed to have your heart set on it.”

She even went so far as to use a clever strategy to land herself in the finale battle.

“I mean, anyone would want to take first place at *some* point during high school... or even just once, period! Obviously we’re all special in our own ways, but... sometimes you find yourself wanting real proof.”

“I get that, but... you know there’s plenty of people who see you as Yamaboshi’s number one, right?”

“I just wanted the title. I thought maybe... I’d find my soulmate or something.”

Knowing her, she’d be back to her usual self come Monday morning, but in her current state, there was no way she’d have fun tonight at the wrap party.

“Hey, Fujishima-saaaaan! Let’s invite all the other classes to the party!” Nagase, the other VIP, called cheerfully. And she wasn’t alone.

“Join us, Fujishima-san! We’ll all have a blast!” said Nakayama.

“And we can’t have a party without our main organizer!” Setouchi added.

“I mean, like, it’s all thanks to you that we had so much fun today!” Kiriya gushed.

“Fun?! Did you forget the part where you *kicked me in the nads?!* ” cried Aoki.

“Pull yourself together, Fujishima. You’re killing the mood,” Himeko goaded.

“I flagged down everyone who was nearby,” Katori explained, bringing up the rear. It was a considerate gesture, and Taichi could easily understand how he had gained so much voter support.

But though they tried to cheer her up, she wasn’t having any of it.

“I’m sorry... I appreciate you all reaching out to me, but this is something I simply have to get over. Don’t worry — I

promise I'll be back to normal next week."

That said, her absence would be conspicuous, and it would almost certainly make the whole party awkward. After all, she had thrown together a massive event that had left special memories in the hearts of all those who participated. Surely some of the seeds it had planted would go on to take further root. There was only one winner, and half of the participants never got to win a single battle, but even then, it was still a uniquely fun time.

But events — like all other good things — had to come to an end, whether they wanted it to or not. Some people were bound to have regrets; hell, a majority of the participants probably wished they could have stayed in the tournament for just one more battle. But eventually those feelings would pass, and then the event would truly be over. No one could fight the flow of time.

Just then, a shadowy figure appeared from a different direction. It was Watase Shingo, Fujishima's partner. Like Fujishima, he had really hoped to win — because he was planning to confess his feelings for her if he did. But their victory never came to pass, and so their dreams scattered in the wind like flower petals.

"F-F-Fujishima-san!" Watase shouted. Everyone in the vicinity turned to look at him.

"Hmm? Watase-kun?" Lethargically, Fujishima raised her head and looked at him.

"Nngh...!"

Watase seemed to be getting cold feet. But he didn't back down.

"There's something I wanted to say to you... I was planning to wait until after we won, but that didn't work out. But that doesn't mean our whole lives are over!"

The event had ended, but their love story could still begin... *No, that's silly.* Taichi shook the thoughts from his mind. Here, in front of all these people, while Fujishima's mood was at an all-time low? Surely there was no way even

a hopeless buffoon like Watase would think *now* was a smart time to confess.

“Watase, I think maybe you should save it for—”

“Fujishima-san, I’m crazy about you! Please be my girlfriend!”

He went there. The words couldn’t be unsaid. There was no going back — only forward, no matter what form her answer took.

Around them, everything went quiet. No one said a word.

“.....What?”

Fujishima blinked.

“Huh? Wh-What?”

She couldn’t seem to process it.

“Wait, what are you — are you joking? Oh my god, are you serious? Oh my god?”

Blushing furiously, she stammered so hard, her glasses went crooked.

“I... I mean, you do compliment me an awful lot, and — and you put a lot of faith in me during the whole tournament, so I could tell you respected me as a person—”

“After this event, I’ve... I’ve fallen in love with you all over again!”

“R-Really? I... I’ve never received such a passionate confession in all my life... I don’t know what to do!”

Her embarrassment was rather charming in a sweet, innocent sort of way...

“Who are you and what happened to Fujishima?” Taichi retorted under his breath.

“Watase-kun, um... Do... Do you really f-feel that... strongly? About me?”

“Yeah. Like I said, I’m crazy about you.”

“Crazy about me, he says... Crazy about me... Eeeeheehee...!” Fujishima clapped her hands to her cheeks and swayed from side to side. This from the same person who once called herself the “Goddess of Love.”

After a moment of waffling, she took a deep breath.

“...Okay. I’ll gladly be your girlfriend, if you’ll have me,” she nodded casually, a gleeful grin on her face.

Clearly Watase wasn’t expecting her to actually say yes, because he froze like a statue.

“O-Okay...?” he asked in a tiny voice, almost like he was worried it was a prank. “So we’re... dating now?”

Bit by bit, it slowly started to sink in.

“I... I GOT FUJISHIMA-SAN TO GO OUT WITH MEEEEEE!”

He thrust his fists into the air in a victory pose. Then Fujishima ran over to him, reached up, and grabbed his hand.

“Let’s get going.”

“Yeah. Together, you and me.”

“Now and always!”

Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!

“Uh, Fujishima? Should... Should we be congratulating you? Are you done being sad?” Taichi asked, mildly confused. It was just so... *sudden*.

“Now that I think about it, about three months ago... February, I think it was... there was a brief moment when I wasn’t sure what path to take. Then you came along and encouraged me to be true to myself. Perhaps this was fated to happen right from that very moment,” Fujishima reminisced wistfully. “Ever since then, I’ve charged full speed ahead — a mad dash down my destined path — and I haven’t stopped once.”

Evidently there was more to this love story than Taichi knew.

“Everyone, allow me to say one last thing,” Fujishima declared, looking at each of the others with a smile so composed, you’d never think she was downright depressed just a few minutes ago. She had adapted herself to this situation *absurdly* fast. “Happiness comes in many forms, and you never know where it might be hiding.”

Silence.

“You win some, you lose some. You can’t always be

number one. So you can't make value judgments based on that alone."

More silence.

"So I hope you all discover what true happiness means to you."

"You're one to talk!" everyone shouted back in perfect sync.

In the end, it was Fujishima Maiko who started this story, Fujishima Maiko who dragged it out, and Fujishima Maiko who ended it on the most ridiculous note possible. All of this pandemonium, caused by a single girl chasing her dreams.

But spring wasn't quite over. And though they were now in their final year of high school, it was shaping up to be the most thrilling year yet...



○ — ♪ —  FLY HIGH, NEW KID!  — ♪ — ○

Fly High, New Kid!

First came the entrance ceremony, then classes started, and the next thing I knew, I was one week into my new life at Yamaboshi High School.

It was the third Monday of April, and by now I'd learned which cars on the train were closest to the platform entrance and which were the quickest to fill up. Personally, I hated the feeling of being packed in tight like sardines, so I generally went for one of the less popular cars.

Then the train arrived at my stop. This was the closest stop for several different schools, so almost everyone who debarked here was wearing a uniform — many of which, unsurprisingly, matched my own. But I didn't see anyone I recognized. This came as both a disappointment *and* a relief.

I waited until everyone else had rushed out, then slowly debarked the train and passed through the turnstiles in the direction of my school. After a long, relaxing weekend, I was ready for a fresh start. We were only a week in, so I hadn't established any particular reputation yet, nor had any cliques fully formed in my class. And while there *were* a handful of people I recognized from middle school, we were essentially starting over from scratch. At this stage, I could make any number of adjustments.

As I walked silently among the crowd of students headed to school, I suddenly spotted two fellow classmates from 1-D a few meters ahead of me, chatting and laughing. I had no memory of ever speaking to them directly, but I definitely recognized their faces, and they would probably recognize me, too... And since we were classmates, I was probably within my rights to say good morning to them...

Wait, but what if they were having a personal

conversation? I couldn't just run up and insert myself. It'd be too awkward. If I interrupted, they'd have to act polite until I left. Was that really how I wanted to have my first-ever conversation with them? And even if they *weren't* having a personal conversation, what if they thought I was rude and nosy?

Besides, we were practically at the front gates. There was no time to actually talk to them when the classroom was just a few more steps away. What if I just made things awkward? I should just ignore them—

Without warning, one of them looked over his shoulder for some reason. It was so sudden, I panicked and looked away.

I was just... looking at the branch on that tree, that's all. It's hanging so low, tall people might walk right into it, and that's no good... That's why I looked to my left just now. Not because I was trying to ignore him or anything. He probably doesn't even think I was. Right? Yeah, totally. Don't get the wrong idea, you guys.

To ensure it didn't happen again, I concealed myself behind the students walking ahead of me as I followed the flow of the crowd through the front gates. Moments later, I heard a chorus of voices calling out:

"Join our club!"

Okay, technically it wasn't a chorus, since they weren't in sync or anything. It was just a bunch of different people yelling the same words — so loudly, I could hear them from all the way off campus, too. But the instant I crossed the threshold, it all overwhelmed me at once. By this point, it had become something of a daily ritual.

At Yamaboshi High School, all students were obligated to join a club. And due to the extremely lax screening process, there were a ton to choose from. Because of that, the clubs had to fight over the limited supply of new students each year, and recruitment was serious business. Some, like the sports teams, prided themselves on large rosters of skilled athletes, while others, like the more artsy clubs, were doing

everything they could just to meet the minimum member requirement. As a result, every inch of campus was covered in people screaming “Join our club!” and handing out flyers.

People. Flyers. People. People. Flyers. Flyers. Flyers. People. It all blurred together and threatened to make me sick. The second they determined that you were a first-year, they swarmed you.

“Hey, have you picked a club yet?”

“You should come check us out anyway!”

“Do you have any plans after school?”

They snagged the student ahead of me, so I used him as a decoy to slip through the crowd as fast as I could. The first time I went through this, I was completely flustered, but after a week, I had adapted somewhat. I didn’t take any flyers. Instead I pressed forward, dodging the people trying to flag me down, with the air of a disaffected second-year and a firm look on my face that said *I’ve got somewhere else to be*.

Fortunately(?), I wasn’t that tall, and I wasn’t that athletic, and I wasn’t that good-looking, so I didn’t catch anyone’s eye. Compared to the students who were pigeonholed into volleyball or basketball due to their physique, I had it easy. I just avoided eye contact with the recruiters and kept on walking. These days it was practically a game to me; the more progress I made, the better I felt—

“J-J-Join our cluhhhwhaaa?!”

Squish.

Out of nowhere, something collided with my body. On reflex, I stopped short to counterbalance its weight. I could see someone’s scalp beneath my chin — poofy brown hair tickling my neck. She smelled sweet, like vanilla. Maybe it was her shampoo, or her body wash, or maybe it was just how girls naturally smelled. Her body was soft and faintly warm, like the perfect pillow... If only I could hug something like this at night, I’d probably get the best sleep of my life...

Wait... I’m... hugging... a girl...?

“Whoa there!”

I let out a weird yelp — even I wasn’t sure where it came from — and jumped backwards.

“Ow!”

Naturally, I slammed into the person behind me.

“Sorry! ...Oh.”

It was a guy in my class, standing next to yet another guy from my class. Apparently they had walked to school together.

“Ow. What was that about? You like to cuddle girls first thing in the morning?”

“Get ‘em, tiger! And in public, too! Damn!”

They were teasing me and laughing, right in the middle of the crowd.

“No, no, no...”

“Is that your girlfriend? You like ‘em a little older?”

I didn’t want to make a scene in front of a bunch of people I didn’t know.

“No! She’s not!”

“Dude, we know...”

“Alright, well, see you...”

Evidently I had denied it too strongly, because they both fixed me with dismal looks, then walked off.

As I watched them go, I cursed myself for not handling it better. I could’ve said “Man, that was crazy!” or played along and said “Yep! That’s my girlfriend! Jealous much?” Then it would have felt like a scene out of a teen movie.

“H-Hey, um, I’m really sorry! I tripped over something, and... well...”

Timidly, the girl from earlier bowed in apology. She was so small, and her behavior so cute and pathetic, she reminded me of a little woodland creature.

“The hell are you doing, Enjouji?”

Then a guy walked up, holding a stack of flyers. My guess was, he was in the same club as her.

“I just tripped, that’s all... I... I’m sorry!”

Then “Enjouji” bowed all over again.

“Freaking klutz.”

“I... I get it, okay?!”

They seemed like close friends.

“Anyway, um... I’m really sorry about that... Here, have a flyer.”

After all that, she had the nerve to offer me a flyer. Nevertheless, I took it from her without thinking. Written on it were the words:

CULTURAL RESEARCH CLUB - NOW RECRUITING!



The next morning, the path from the gates to the school building was once again packed full of people. Each voice spoke in exactly the same tone: *Join our club! Please join our club!* And once again, I walked right on by.

But this time, a single voice stood out more clearly than the rest:

“We’re the CRC! Join our club!”

The CRC. Also known as the Cultural Research Club. If I had to guess, I was probably one of only a handful of first-years who knew. After all, it was a tiny, forgettable club. But after I saw that flyer yesterday, for some reason, the knowledge was burned into my mind.

I glanced over. Enjouji was standing there with that same guy from yesterday, plus two more girls: one with long, dark hair and one with long, reddish-brown hair. They were so radiant, it was if a spotlight was shining down on them, drawing all eyes like a magnet. The other club recruiters nearby couldn’t possibly compare.

“Join the CRC!”

Even the two new girls were saying it, so clearly they were in the club, too. Then I started thinking maybe I was wrong about them being small and unpopular... but no, I wasn’t. Although they could draw the students’ attention,

not many stopped to take a flyer. And of those who did, almost all of them merely glanced over it before stuffing it into their bookbags.

Was this club going to find enough members...? Well, not like it was any of my business. And so I gave them a wide berth as I made my way to my classroom.

Right as I was starting to think I wasn't going to talk to anyone new today, one of my classmates spoke to me for the first time.

"You said you were in the ping-pong club in middle school, right?"

I was sitting in the classroom, packing up after the final bell. And since I was in Go-Home Mode, I wasn't mentally prepared for someone to strike up a conversation.

"Wanna join Yamaboshi's ping-pong club?"

"Nah, I think I'm done with ping-pong now that I'm in high school."

I couldn't find the right words. What came out instead was incredibly blunt.

"Aww, c'mon! Don't give up now!"

"I'm just kinda bored of it," I replied flatly.

"...Okay then."

And that was where the conversation ended. He walked over to someone else, and I missed my chance to correct myself.

As I recalled, he was in the ping-pong club in middle school, too. And I'd heard that he was trying to start a new club here at Yamaboshi. But I was never very good at ping-pong, and since I had no hope of improving, I wasn't interested in pursuing it any further. Instead, I was hoping to join a more popular club... Not that I was going to pick my club based entirely on how much attention I could get from girls, mind you.

Still, I could have said something better than "I'm bored of it." I could have said "I'm not personally interested, but I

support you starting up a new ping-pong club.” Or “I remember you were really good.” Or “We should play a match together sometime.” I could have kept the conversation going in any number of ways.

Then, as I was drowning in regrets, I overheard one of the guys in a group chatting nearby.

“Man, did you see that Culture Whatever Club? The girls were so hot! Let’s go check them out!”

“Cultural *Research* Club, or CRC. Says so right here on the flyer.”

“I was thinking I wouldn’t mind paying them a visit at least once!”

“But you’re not gonna join?”

“Look, dude, they *want* people to sit in on their club activities, right? So what’s the harm?”

Apparently they were having fun planning out what clubs they wanted to visit. This was hardly a rare occurrence; I only noticed because I heard them mention the CRC. Even those who had already basically chosen their club were still more than happy to browse around for the fun of it.

Because the conversation had caught my attention, I naturally looked in their direction. Then one of the guys in the group looked over, and our eyes met.

“Weren’t you hugging one of those CRC chicks yesterday morning?”

I felt my heart thump loudly in my chest.

“Yeah, I remember that. I was like, damn! Wasn’t expecting him to go there!” added another of the guys who witnessed the incident in question.

“What? I didn’t hear about this. What happened?”

I needed to say something.

“It... It was an accident,” I told them, since it was the truth.

“Have you been to see the CRC?”

“No, I haven’t...”

“Then would you wanna come with us? We were just

talking about it.”

And so the conversation went in an unexpected direction.

“Come on in!”

After we climbed up the stairs to the top floor of the ancient Rec Hall building and entered Room 401, the dark-haired girl from this morning welcomed us in with her arms outstretched. She was so startlingly beautiful, I nearly recoiled.

“So, um, the five of us were hoping to sit in on your club today...”

“Okie-dokie! Yeah, I figured. Anyway, have a seat!”

“Feel free to relax. Man, we’re really popular today,” said a laid-back guy as he pulled out a chair.

“Probably because Yui and I helped pass out flyers this morning!”

“...Honestly, I can’t even argue with that.”

There was a long table in the center of the room surrounded by folding chairs. The bookshelves were packed full of manga, magazines, board games, and a box labeled “Misc.”

“C-Come on in! I’ll make some tea!”

It was Enjouji, the girl who’d bumped into me. In total, there were three club members present.

“Make sure you don’t spill any, Shino-chan!”

Apparently her full name was Enjouji Shino. My eyes met hers... but then she looked back to her two-liter bottle of tea and started pouring it into the paper cups. She didn’t seem to recognize who I was.

Apparently a different group of first-years arrived shortly before we did, and they were chatting with some other club members in the room next door, since that room was more spacious. Although our two groups would remain separate, they decided to go fetch the other club members and briefly bring them into the room for a round of introductions. Altogether, there were seven members in total.

With twelve people now packed into the room, it was getting kinda cramped. Our seven senpai let us take the chairs while they remained standing.

“N-Now then, it’s time for introductions!”

And so Enjouji started the guided club tour. She was so visibly nervous, it was making *me* sweat.

However...

“Yo!”

“Here we go!”

“Finally!”

“I can’t wait!”

...the four guys I came with were all so excited, it quickly eased the tension. As for me, I missed my chance to join in. But it was still early — there’d be more chances.

This was a massive opportunity for me. If all went well, I could fit in with this group of guys. They were pretty popular from what I could tell, which meant I could be popular.

“Okay then... Inaba-senpai, if... if you would start us off, please!”

Now that she had regained her composure, Enjouji seemed to find her words more easily.

“Inaba Himeko, third-year and former vice president. My activities included programming and... well, tinkering with computers, that sort of thing.”

“Oooh!”

“You sound smart!”

“That’s badass!”

“Stoic and sexy, like an ice queen!”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” she replied offhandedly like it was no big deal. She was as pretty as a painting — the sort of aloof girl I would admire from afar.

“Yaegashi Taichi, third-year. My club activities were mainly focused on pro wrestling activism,” said the laid-back guy from earlier. Sure enough, he turned out to be a third-year. Based on his looks, he seemed like the type to get a lot of girls, but... pro wrestling activism? *Sounds cringey.*

"You can safely disregard the pro wrestling thing."

"Inaba! We're all supposed to talk about our hobbies — hey, don't give me that withering look! You know I can't call you Himeko right now!"

Then Yaegashi and Inaba started bickering. They seemed close; probably dating.

On second thought, maybe I shouldn't make that assumption. Only a total virgin would look at a guy-girl friendship and assume they *had* to be romantically involved.

"Alllllrighty then, my turn! Aoki Yoshifumi, third-year! My stance is pretty much 'I'm down for anything, as long as it's fun.' And for the record, Kiriya Yui here is my girlfriend!"

Wha...?!

Sure, the guy *looked* like an airhead, but even then, I wasn't expecting him to be so dumb.

"Excuse you! Can you, like, at least wait until I've had my turn?!" the girl with the reddish-brown hair growled, flailing her arms.

Not only was she rather feminine in appearance, but her mannerisms were cute and girly, too. So she was dating that guy? Was half of this club paired up with the other half? The other first-years reacted similarly.

"For reals?"

"Whoa..."

"Aw, c'mon, Yui! It's the truth!"

"Hmmm..."

"...Uh, Inaba? Why are you staring at me? We don't have to make a big deal of it, you know..."

Was there something going on between Inaba and Yaegashi, too? What kind of club *was* this, anyway? That said, the guy-to-girl ratio seemed pretty balanced here. Maybe I could score, too. Not that I cared about losing my virginity that much. I *did* want a girlfriend, though.

"Okay, let's keep this ball rolling! Kiriya Yui, third-year. I stopped attending as much as I used to because karate was eating into my time, but my favorite activities were arts and

crafts and all things cute!”

Her vibrant smile and toned figure did suggest she was involved in *some* kind of sport, but I wasn’t expecting karate of all things. With her looks, she’d probably be hailed as a prodigy — assuming she was any good at it, anyway.

“Alright! That just leaves one last third-year: me, Nagase Iori, former president! My usual club activities were: reading manga, eating snacks, hanging out with friends...”

“So in other words, the same things you do on the weekends?”

“Inaban! Don’t you dare besmirch the honor of our esteemed club!”

Nagase Iori was the one name I recognized. After all, everyone was always saying how she was the prettiest third-year, or maybe the prettiest girl at Yamaboshi, period. And now that I was looking at her, I could see it. She sparkled like a teen idol.

Somehow these five third-years all seemed too perfect to be ordinary people — more like movie stars. They radiated an aura of confidence and a sense of unity that anyone would aspire to. They seemed to have it all.

Meanwhile, the other first-years whispered amongst themselves:

“Man, they’re kinda intimidating...”

“But they’re so cool...”

“And the girls are incredible...”

“But they’re taken...”

I didn’t join in. After all, I wasn’t really one of them.

“So why were you guys all speaking in past tense? Are you all retired from the club now?” one asked.

“Well, we already passed on our leadership titles, but we’re not *officially* retired, I don’t think,” Nagase answered.

“Basically, the second-years are in charge of the daily activities, including recruitment, and we just pop in every now and then to help hand out flyers and do club orientation and stuff like that. We like to check in on them once or twice

a week, like, 'Are you winning, kids?' That kinda thing."

"Or so you say, except you're seemingly always here."

"Our kouhai must be sick to death of you by now."

"Taichi! Inaban! Quit ganging up on me!"

These third-years seemed really, really close.

"Anyway, moving on to the current members. I'm the current club president, Uwa Chihiro, second-year."

It was the guy I saw handing out flyers. He had a perfectly symmetrical, almost androgynous face, which meant he was probably super popular with the girls. Not only that, but he had a well-toned body that suggested he was good at sports. *Man, some people have all the luck.*

"My CRC activities include... well, studying, mostly."

"Don't tell them that! Make something up if you have to!" Inaba retorted. Apparently she was the wise-cracking snarker of the group.

"A-And last but not least, I'm Enjouji Shino, vice president, second-year. Nice to meet you!"

She was older than me, and yet the way she bowed was just so precious. She didn't really seem like a vice president, though — if anything, she triggered a... what's the term... a *protective instinct* that made me want to help her.

Though these second-years were decidedly different from the third-years, they were still far beyond my level. They seemed to be gifted in their own ways, and they probably lived happy lives — I could tell from the general vibes they gave off.

"My hobbies include... following in my senpai's footsteps... Self-improvement, I guess you could say...?"

That's your HOBBY?

"Anyway, that's it for our side of things! Now it's your turn!" said former president Nagase, gesturing to us.

"Nagase, we're supposed to be letting them handle it," Yaegashi muttered.

"Oh, you're right! I was so excited, I forgot!"

They seemed like an excitable bunch, but at least they

had the self-awareness to defer to the second-years.

The first-years all exchanged a glance, myself included. But I was conscious of the gulf between me and them. I wasn't part of their group, so I was in no position to go first. I didn't have a firm grasp of their rapport with each other.

"...Okay then, I'll start. Takeda, from Class 1-D. Real talk, I'm serious about joining a sports team, but you guys have a cool vibe, so I decided to visit."

"Did you hear that?! I have a 'cool vibe'!"

"Nagase, will you settle down already?"

"She's right, though! You're incredible, Nagase-senpai!"

"And *you* clearly have good taste, my dear Takeda-kun!"

It was an impressive start, especially since he was speaking to a student two full years older than him.

"Alright, my turn. I'm Okamoto, same class. I heard Kiriya-san is super good at karate, so I got curious. See, I'm thinking about joining the karate club."

"Oh, cool," said Kiriya.

"You *are* allowed to be in two clubs, for the record," Uwa added.

"I can't believe someone as cute as you is a karate master!"

As for me, I couldn't believe he went there! He told a girl two years older than him — a girl with a boyfriend, no less — that she was cute! Was that the kind of conversation we were having?

"C-C-Cute...?! *Karate master*?! Heeheeheeheehee... You think so...?"

"Yui?! What are you so happy about?! I tell you that stuff all the time!"

"It doesn't mean anything coming from you!"

"Yes, whenever I look at Aoki-san, I'm reminded of what truly matters in life..."

"Shino-chan, what does that even *mean*?!"

Both the first-years and the CRC were so absurdly casual with each other, you'd never think they had only just met.

Was this what was expected of me, too? If so, maybe I wouldn't be able to handle it after all. But if I couldn't manage it, then maybe my aspiration to join the popular crowd was just a pipe dream. Here I was, trying to be respectful of everyone, but no one seemed to give a damn about me in return.

"And you?"

Even after the other four had finished their introductions, I didn't want to derail the flow of conversation, so I stayed quiet. But then Inaba looked at me from across the table and prompted me to speak.

This was the aloof, cynical girl. Her perfectly straight posture and narrowed eyes made me shrink into myself. There was a pause.

My throat was so dry, I wasn't sure I could actually speak. I couldn't think straight — everything I'd thought of saying while the others were talking had flown out the window. But the longer this pause went on, the weirder I would look, so I had to say something.

First, I introduced myself, then mentioned my club in middle school.

"I, uh... I wasn't interested in coming here, but things just kinda happened."

Sure enough, I killed the mood. Why would I say that? Sure, it was true, but I didn't need to tell them. Now everything was awkward.

I should have said something flattering... I should have lied and said I was excited to be here... But I wasn't a good actor, so...

Ugh, I screwed up. I want to go home. The other guys are all looking at me funny... I'll never be able to join them now.

"W-Well, it doesn't matter how you got here! We're just happy you're here at all!" Enjouji exclaimed brightly, before the mood could sour completely. Everyone's attention diverted from me.

Good, good. Now to slink into the shadows.

“Anyway, that’s it from us first-years. Oh, but I had a question...”

“A question, eh? Bring it on!”

“Seriously, Iori, let them handle it!”

“What exactly does the CRC do?”

It was a pretty basic question. Come to think of it, I didn’t know the answer, either.

For a moment I was scared they would yell at us, like, “How dare you not know about our club beforehand!” But instead, the club members all fell perfectly silent.

I looked at each of them in turn, wondering who would answer. Likewise, the other first-years followed suit. Then the CRC members started trading looks. But eventually, all eyes settled on a single point: club president Uwa Chihiro.

Sensing our gazes, Uwa thrust out his chest and declared: “What do we do? Whatever we want!”



The next day at lunch, I hadn’t brought anything to eat, so instead I went to the school store to buy a sandwich. I didn’t invite anyone to tag along with me; no point when I was just running there and back. Surely no one would think I was a friendless loser. After all, I had a group I ate lunch with in the classroom.

That said, we only ate together because we sat next to each other, and there was no telling if they’d actually wait for me to get back. Granted, this errand wouldn’t take long... but I’d already told them they didn’t have to wait for me, so they probably already started... I decided to hurry.

There was no chance of me inserting myself into that group of guys I visited the CRC with, so my best bet was to form connections with my current group. Here at this school, it was the one place I could claim to belong.

Traveling from the East Wing, I cut through the courtyard. During lunch, the place was buzzing with activity, and a few

clubs were recruiting. I knew before I enrolled that Yamaboshi put a lot of emphasis on club culture, but it still wowed me every time. Some were simply handing out flyers, but others were actively inviting people to hang out and eat lunch with them.

As I made my way through, two voices rang out through the din:

“Why not sit down and hear us out before you go?”

“J-Just for a minute or two!”

It was Uwa and Enjouji from the CRC. They were facing a different direction, so they hadn’t spotted me. And since they were busy talking to someone else, there was no reason for me to talk to them... so I walked right on by.

There were no other people in the way, so I could hear their conversation clearly.

“Um... what kind of club is it?”

“Whatever kind of club you want! Join us, and you can do anything you like.”

“*Anything...*? So basically, you don’t do any one thing in particular?”

“Y-You could say that, I guess...”

“Then why have a club at all? Give me a break!” the first-year scoffed, with a look on her face like *surely you must be joking*.

“To be clear, we do publish a monthly newsletter called the Culture Bulletin,” Uwa clarified when he realized things weren’t going well. “We make articles about parts of culture that interest us. In the past, we’ve even published paparazzi photos.”

“So it’s like the Newspaper Club?”

“K-Kinda, but not really...? The newsletter isn’t the main focus...”

“I don’t really get it. Anyway, I gotta go to the cafeteria.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“Right. Sorry for holding you up. Take a flyer with you, though, in case you change your mind.”

And so they were shot down spectacularly. *Good grief... Wait, why did I slow down to eavesdrop on them? I gotta hurry.* This was no time for me to be worrying about other people. I needed to go buy my sandwich.

Be it settling into high school or choosing a club, it felt like I was always running behind. Why hadn't I chosen a club yet? Some students had submitted an application on the first day of school. Others had already settled into the respective communities of their clubs. The longer I took, the harder it would be to insert myself.

Out of nowhere, a gust of wind kicked up the dust, and a sheet of paper blew up at me, landing square against my chest. It was a flyer. Someone had dropped it, either on accident or on purpose. Since it had touched the ground, I was going to crumple it up into a ball and throw it away.

But then I saw the words: *Be A Part Of The Culture Bulletin!*

There were sample images of past issues, too. *Top 5 Coolest Pro Wrestling Moves. This Year's Ultimate Cute Championship.*

This was followed by the tagline: *Turn Your Passion Into An Article!*

Compared to the flyer I was given, this one was more heavily focused on the club's actual activities. It was accentuated with some artwork, and it actually looked pretty good, if a bit on the girly side... Was it Enjouji who made these? No, that didn't matter.

Frankly speaking, if someone wanted to make a newspaper, they would join the Newspaper Club. And if they had one specific interest, they would join a club focused on that interest — because, with the massive number of clubs here at Yamaboshi, it was guaranteed to exist.

So what was the point of the Culture Research Club?
Who the hell would join this club?

After I started thinking about the CRC's purpose, I found

myself watching Uwa and Enjouji the next day at lunchtime as they passed out flyers in the courtyard. I could see two CRC third-years standing a short distance away — Yaegashi and Aoki, watching over their kouhai.

But this time they weren't distracted talking to someone else, so they spotted me right away. Our eyes met, and Enjouji waved at me eagerly.

"H-Hi there! I remember you came to see us the other day!"

"Y-Yeah..."

I couldn't just ignore her since she was technically my senpai, so I walked over to her.

Enjouji Shino... She hadn't commented on our accidental hug since the day it happened, so she must have forgotten about it by now. To me, it was a pretty wild incident, but given her natural klutziness, maybe that sort of thing happened to her every day.

—Remember that time you hugged me out of nowhere? That was so crazy.

—I'm so sorry about that!

—For a minute I thought you were flirting with me.

—Oh my gosh, you're so silly! It was an accident, I swear!

But this imagined conversation would never actually happen.

"Wanna come see us again? We won't ask you to join," said Uwa. Apparently he was bored enough to join in.

That said, I *did* have a question I wanted to ask them.

"I've been wondering, um... how many second-year members do you have?"

Supposedly the third-years had all retired, which meant the second-years were in charge of the club... but I'd only ever seen these two.

"...Well, it's no secret, but..." Uwa began awkwardly.

"There's actually just the two of us," Enjouji finished.

"Oh."

They both looked downcast. Was this a sensitive subject

for them? Seriously though, just two second-years? *Yikes.*

"Don't you need a minimum of five members to keep your club...?"

"Ah, I see you're familiar with the rules. This year we're safe, since the third-years are still included in the member count, but if we can't get our hands on some first-years, we'll be in real trouble next year. So it's kind of a life or death situation!" Uwa joked.

But to me, this wasn't a joke at all. Their club was a sinking ship. Was there anyone out there who would climb aboard?

"Well, um, do you have any prospective members so far?" I asked, purely out of curiosity. I was interested to see what would happen to them.

"W-Well, we don't know yet. We've had plenty of people come see us, but no one's promised to join... What about those boys who came with you?" Enjouji asked.

She didn't want to know about me — she wanted to know about *them*. But to be fair, anyone would be more interested in those who were actually sociable.

"Hah. As if they'd actually join," I replied, more aggressively than I meant to for some reason.

"Oh... Right..."

Enjouji slumped her shoulders like a scolded puppy. Then Uwa scowled at me.

Wait... Is it my fault? Why? What did I do? Oh, crap.

"I just mean, uh, they're probably more interested in the sports teams. Just a guess, though. Probably."

Before I knew it, it was Friday once again. It was like one minute I was planning to turn over a new leaf, but then I blinked, and an entire week had gone by.

In that short timeframe, I managed to visit four other clubs, but none of them really grabbed me.

Sure, only two weeks had passed since the start of the school year, but two weeks was still enough time for cliques

to form. In my class there was one big co-ed group which consisted of several smaller groups, plus some guy-only and girl-only groups which had zero overlap.

But where did I fit in? Nowhere? ...No, there was still time before the dust settled. And I, too, could settle just about anywhere.

"So, about Saturday... Everyone's invited to the park to play some volleyball," said one of the guys as we all packed up to head home.

Rumor had it that there was going to be a volleyball tournament in gym class next week, and the biggest clique was talking about getting together to practice ahead of time. I knew this because I had eavesdropped on their entire conversation.

"You know that tournament in gym class? Well, if we're gonna be competing against other classes, I figure it'd be fun to win," said one of the girls from the same clique.

"And it'll help us get to know each other!" said another.

Apparently this was something the cool kids had come up with. Every class had its popular clique, but ours consisted of all the friendliest, most outgoing students... for now, at least.

"So what'll it be, everybody? If you've already got plans, don't worry about it!"

Or so they claimed. But in reality, this was a test of loyalty. People who showed up were "fun," and people who didn't show up were "no fun." I understood how this game worked — attending these things was important, because over time it would build friendships. But did I really want friendships predicated entirely on a single event? No way.

Thus, I decided not to go.

I didn't know who was going to be there. If I showed up and it was nothing but tryhards, I'd feel awkward and out of place. Besides, I didn't want to waste my weekend coming all the way back out here. So instead I pretended not to hear them with a serious look on my face that said *sorry, I'm*

busy.

"What about you?" asked a tall, energetic, loud girl out of nowhere.

Stunned, I blinked at her. It was all too sudden — I didn't have an answer prepared. *Have you considered that maybe I have more important things to do?*

All eyes were on us. I knew she'd only asked me because they happened to be talking about it when I passed by. *What should I say? What SHOULDN'T I say?*

"Uh, sorry... I have plans that day."

"Oh, okay. Maybe next time," she replied casually, then went back to her group. Meanwhile, the class continued to buzz with excitement.

"What about you?"

"I've got club practice, but I might be able to make it if the times don't overlap."

"How many volleyballs do we need? Will the school let us borrow them?"

"Ooh, I can't wait!"

Everyone seemed to be looking forward to it... but I wasn't part of it. No one went out of their way to talk me out of my "other plans." Instead, they started to discuss what time to meet up, so I headed out.

Honestly, it was for the best. At least this way I managed to avoid making it awkward. Plus, no one was going to show up to play volleyball on a Saturday — no one except the tryhards. They wouldn't even notice my absence.

But if lots of people *did* show up... The thought terrified me. What if they all collectively decided that I was uncool? Ugh, why did I have to shoot her down point-blank? Now I couldn't take it back.

Damn it. I cursed my folly. Now I didn't feel like visiting any clubs anymore. *Forget it — I'll just go home.*

As I headed toward the front gates, I could once again hear the club recruiters calling across campus, trying to flag down the students headed straight home. They each had

their own communities, and they were attempting to pull more people in.

"Feel free to check us out before you go!"

"Newcomers always welcome!"

But I wasn't planning to go see anyone, so I ignored them and kept walking. I shut them out of my own free will... but it made my chest ache. It felt like everyone was leaving me behind, and one day I would be truly alone.

"Join our club!"

"We're about to start our club activities! Feel free to join in and try us out!"

They all said the same things, over and over. It barely registered as background noise at this point. But there were two voices that stood out from the crowd:

"...W-Well, I guess it's time to start!"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Reflexively, I looked in the direction of the voices. It was Uwa and Enjouji from the Cultural Research Club. They were standing off to the side of the paved road that led to the gates, facing the stream of people shoulder-to-shoulder like a comedy duo... and yet they refused to make eye contact with anyone, almost like they were forced to do this against their will.

"Now's the time for new students to commit to a club, wouldn't you say, Enjouji-san?"

"Oh, you're absolutely right, Uwa-san."

"But I bet there's some people out there who just can't find the perfect club for them."

"That sounds tough."

"Maybe they have too many interests and can't pick just one."

"Then they should join the CRC!"

"What if they just want to have fun and don't care how?"

"Join the CRC!"

"What if they like pro wrestling?"

"Join the CRC!"

“What if they want to read manga?”

“Well, there’s always the Manga Club, but they could also join the CRC!”

“What if they’re tired—”

“Join the CRC!”

“Okay, now you’re just being ridiculous!”

“Join the—”

“What are you, a broken record?! ...And that’s our show, folks.”

“Thank you... We’ll be here all night...”

From what I could tell, it was some kind of comedy routine meant to advertise their club, but their voices kept wavering, and it was hard to tell whether they actually wanted anyone to listen. Nobody approached them, but a handful of people — myself included — watched from a safe distance. What a disaster.

They stared down at the ground for a long moment.

“Damn it, I knew we were going to screw this up and make everyone think we’re a couple of losers! Only a weirdo like Nagase-san would find this funny!” Uwa shouted up at the sky.

“Ch-Chihiro-kun, quit it! You’re embarrassing me!” Enjouji whimpered from behind her hands.

They were clearly getting desperate.

“Huh...? Oh, hey! We meet again.”

I stared at them for so long, Uwa caught sight of me. *Ugh, don’t wave me over! I don’t want anyone thinking I associate with you!*

That said, no one from my class was around. Probably still in the classroom, talking about Saturday. Once I made sure of this, I walked over.

“We keep finding each other, huh? Especially at lunchtime,” Enjouji commented.

“...Well, you’re right here by the gates, so...”

That said, she had a point. I had only visited them once, same with all the other clubs, and yet it felt like we couldn’t

get away from each other. But because I sensed that our interactions would eventually end, it made said interactions a lot less stressful, since I didn't have to worry about screwing up.

"So what are you guys doing?"

"W-Well, Nagase-san started talking about this 'great idea' she had to promote the club..."

Even Uwa looked flustered. This was probably the most humiliating day of their lives.

"Nnngh..." Enjouji whimpered and crouched down into a ball, clutching her hair.

But while I was impressed they had the guts to go through with it, a question rose to mind.

"Why are you guys so passionate about your stupid club, anyway?"

The word *stupid* left my lips before I could stop it. Now, for the first time, I realized just how I felt about all this club stuff — *especially* the CRC in particular. Why would they sacrifice their time, effort, and reputation for a club with no purpose?

"You're right. It *is* a stupid club. Me personally, I never wanted to do the club activities because I didn't see the point in it," Uwa replied.

"Then why...?"

"Because I decided I wanted to make something of it."

But why join *that* club? Why spend a year of your time there? Why take on the role of president? Why try to fix it?

Uwa didn't try to rationalize his reasoning. He simply smirked at me.

"Well... I don't think it's going to work out for you."

That was my honest opinion.



The next week, the CRC second-years continued to experiment with new methods of recruitment with the occasional help of the third-years — from morning to

evening. *Don't you need to study? Or hang out with friends?* I was tempted to stick my nose where it didn't belong.

Monday: They held a pre-test study party and said that anyone who attended would receive a legendary item that would indisputably improve test scores: Inaba's Study Notebook, filled with tips and countermeasures for tests in every subject. (However, this attracted third-years more than first-years.)

Tuesday: They announced that their collection of manga and games was so extensive, anyone would find something they liked, no matter the genre — and if there was any unfilled niche, they invited visitors to supply it themselves. (What kind of incentive was that supposed to be?)

Wednesday: Another of Nagase's ideas, probably, except this time they performed a "Top Three Best Parts Of The CRC Rap" (and it was so painful to listen to that I didn't stick around to find out what they were).

As for how successful these attempts were... well, it was none of my business anyway.

The days passed one after another, and before I knew it, it was Thursday.

There was a weird rumor going around, and when I first heard it, I was sure it had to be a joke. I knew the rules here were lax, but still. *Surely no one our age would actually come up with something that stupid*, I thought to myself.

But then the student council gave a presentation about it, sign-up forms were handed out, volunteers were requested to help with setup... and that was when I realized it was really happening.

They called it: "Couples' Battle Royale." What a bizarre name. At first everyone wanted to know why they had to pair up, but then the third-years came around on it, which led the second-years to come around, and in the end, the whole school decided it was a great idea. Apparently this was just another Yamaboshi thing.

But in a sense, this was a prime opportunity. An all-student event would be a breath of fresh air. Instead of letting the days slip away from me in a blur, I could actually look forward to something exciting happening.

That said, I knew this opportunity was a double-edged sword. Back in middle school, there were countless times when I took my chances and put myself out there, only to regret it by the end. Just because something was a break from the norm didn't mean I would be any different; if anything, it meant my usual day-to-day behavior wouldn't fly. Everyone would suddenly have a different attitude — one that I wouldn't be able to match — and I wouldn't fit in.

This event would require me to have a partner. Who would I team up with? The only people I was remotely friends with were the people in my lunch group... *Okay, let's think about it.* Two of them were friends from middle school, and the other two were both planning to join the swim team. Looking at it that way, I would almost certainly be the odd one out.

Students without partners usually ended up asking permission to make a three-person group, or else they would get stuck with a teacher... Actually, scratch that; this was an all-student event. Alright then, what if I paired up with a girl and used it as an opportunity to get to know her? ...Okay, but who?

Me, ask a girl to be my partner? Get real.

There was no way of knowing who would actually show up on the big day, so a lot of people were saying they'd wait until then to pair up. But while I could *imagine* myself casually asking someone on the spur of the moment, I had no delusions that it would actually be that easy in reality.

I was out of options. All I could do was look for a way out.

Think about it — it's happening on a weekend. Do you really want to put on your uniform and go all the way back to school? For FUN? You only get two days off per week. Don't you have more important things to be doing on a

Saturday?

Unlike these people, I was busy. I wasn't scared that I wouldn't find a partner! I was just thinking about my schedule, weighing the pros and cons... risk versus return...

Ugh, forget it—

"Wait, are you going to be there on Saturday?" a classmate asked out of nowhere, and I...

Then Saturday rolled around.

"You're staying home today, right? I'm expecting a package, so be sure to answer the door. I don't have lunch prepped, so get whatever. I'll give you some money later," my mother said, all in a single breath, before rushing out of the house.

Following a careful evaluation, I decided not to take part in the Couples' Battle Royale. As far as I could tell, hardly any first-years were going to participate.

It was just past ten in the morning. Were they duking it out over at Yamaboshi right about now? I couldn't really picture what it must have looked like. After all, everyone would be competing in pairs... Were they mostly guy-girl pairs? Guy-guy pairs would have a physical advantage, but maybe there were certain battles where girls would have the upper hand... Not that I'd ever know unless I went to see for myself.

Wait, so... did I *want* to go see it after all? Or was I just mad at myself for missing out? *Ugh*. I could feel myself mentally comparing my life with the one I wanted, and the two weren't even close.

I was never bullied in middle school, nor was I a loner. I was in a club, and my life was overall pretty normal. That said, it was by no means *fun*. I couldn't put my finger on any one particular problem, but something was off. Something prevented me from being truly happy.

It felt like a weird sort of domino effect. At some point I had made the wrong move, and it set off a chain reaction I

could never undo.

Eventually I gave up on fixing my middle school life and decided to shape something different in high school — something *better*. I purposely chose a high school that almost no one from my middle school had picked, and since it was slightly out of my league grades-wise, I asked my parents to pay for cram school on the weekends.

Based on the pamphlets and everything I'd heard secondhand, Yamaboshi offered more freedom than any other high school of its caliber. It felt like the possibilities were endless. But obviously I wasn't assuming the school itself would magically fix everything, so I put other preparations in place, too. I went to a different barber and asked him to trim my eyebrows. I used my allowance to buy clothes that were a bit nicer and more expensive. Then I watched a bunch of TV shows and read magazines so I could be up to date on the latest pop culture in case it came up in conversation.

I wanted to be ready for any opportunity that came my way. I promised myself I would try my best to change my life, and I was so sure it would happen for me eventually. But then three weeks went by with no sign of anything new on the horizon. Here I was, stuck at home on a Saturday.. and probably the rest of the weekend, too.

After high school entrance exams had ended, I had gotten even more obsessed with watching videos and occasionally leaving comments. I felt so connected to the world around me, yet shut out from it at the same time.

My life as-is was fun and interesting, and I wouldn't say it was entirely bad. But I could tell that it wasn't what I really wanted.

I opened a new tab in my browser window and typed into the search bar: *high school going badly*. Then I looked through the results, starting from the top and working my way down. Some of those pages had links to other pages, and if they caught my interest, I clicked on them — surfing

my way through the World Wide Web. Then, before I knew it, I found myself reading the dictionary definition of a word that had nothing to do with my original search.

There was so much knowledge here, and plenty of it was brand new to me. But none of it was the answer I was looking for.

Ugh, maybe I should've gone to the Battle Royale after all.

My thoughts went around and around in circles, and time continued to tick by.



On Monday after the Couples' Battle Royale, *everybody* was talking about it.

"How many flowers did you guys end up getting?"

"Six! We won two battles."

"What kind of battles?"

"Darts, if you can believe it!"

"...Funny you should say that, because I kinda can't."

"Who did you fight?"

"Well, we bumped into some third-years and couldn't slip away..."

"Which first-year pair survived the longest?"

"I heard it was Itou-kun and Narita-san from Class 1-C!"

Everyone who participated in the event was talking about things that only they would understand. Him, him, her, him... Somehow it felt like everyone in the room had taken part. Was there anyone here who *didn't*? Were they just standing around quietly and letting the other people talk? I couldn't tell.

So instead, I sat at my desk and started prepping for my next class.

"Man, I wish I could've been there," said a guy behind me. *Oh, good.* Evidently not everyone had participated.

"So who won?"

“The student council president and this really pretty third-year girl. Figures, am I right? So why couldn’t you make it?”

“It was just too sudden, man. I already bought concert tickets for that day.”

Apparently there was a small minority of people who didn’t attend the event, mostly those who had some previous engagement. I swallowed and cleared my throat. Someone was bound to ask me why I wasn’t there, and I needed to think of a reason.

I was at a wedding? No, too forced. I went into town with my mom? They’ll think I’m a mama’s boy! I didn’t feel the need to come? They’ll think I’m a hipster who hates anything mainstream. I made plans with some friends from middle school? ...Well, they can’t fault me for prioritizing the plans I already made, and this way they’ll think I have friends... Yeah, that works.

Then first period ended. But during the break period, no one talked to me, so the subject didn’t come up.

Then second period ended. A guy asked me in passing if we were supposed to change classrooms for the next class, so I told him I was pretty sure we didn’t have to. Then a girl asked me the same question, and I gave her the same answer. No one asked me about the Battle Royale.

Then third period ended. I talked to a chatty guy about the TV shows we watched on Sunday. There was a group behind us talking about the Battle Royale, but they didn’t ask me about it.

Then it was time for lunch.

Stretching, I glanced around. Everyone had fallen into their usual routine by this point, and likewise, I did the same. The five of us all automatically gathered in one corner of the classroom. There, sure enough, the conversation turned to the Couples’ Battle Royale. It was a bizarre, uncommon event, and even those who normally struggled to make small talk would jump at the chance to discuss it.

Apparently everyone else in the group had participated, which surprised me.

“What kind of battle did you have?”

“Team shogi.”

“Oh. That’s not as crazy as I was expecting.”

“What about you?”

“Ping-pong doubles.”

“Yawn...”

“Hey!”

Everyone laughed, and I laughed along with them. There was nothing for me to contribute to the conversation.

“Oh, and did you see that karate match?!”

“No, but I wish!”

“I’m telling you, it was nothing like you see on TV!”

“Love me some girl-on-girl action!”

“Whoa there, buddy...”

I nodded along to every subject change. It was a fun conversation, and the event itself was probably even better. But right now, I felt nothing. It was like I was just watching a show on TV — I couldn’t get invested at all.

After lunch, classes started up again, with break periods in between, back and forth and back and forth until at last I reached the final class of the day. In the end, no one ever asked me why I didn’t go to the event. Not once had I spoken of the hot topic that 99 percent of Yamaboshi students were talking about. That much was fact.

After school ended, the mood in the classroom was more cheerful and lighthearted than usual. It was the last week of April, the fifth week of the first semester, and we were now just days away from Golden Week, which probably contributed... but it felt like the Couples’ Battle Royale had made some serious waves. As a result, everyone in school seemed to be a lot more friendly with each other.

But I hadn’t caught those waves, and now I had been left behind.

Before this, I had already vaguely sensed — no, I *knew for*

a fact — that I was running behind everyone else, but this was the final nail in the coffin.

Why did it turn out this way? I didn't understand what I did wrong. I couldn't think of anything. Why? Wasn't everything going to change after I started high school? Wasn't I going to improve my life? Not that I was trying to do something as cringey as a "high school makeover," but still, wasn't this supposed to afford me new opportunities? And yet none of it had turned out the way I imagined.

"You know Nagase-senpai, the girl who won the tournament? Wanna go see her?"

"Yeah, totally!"

"I heard she's *soooo* pretty!"

More Battle Royale again. At this point, every time the subject came up, it felt like the world was judging me for not having participated, and I couldn't take it anymore. Maybe tomorrow would be better, but I was done for today. I packed up my notebooks and pencil case and rose from my chair. No one noticed. So I left the classroom without speaking to a single person.

I walked out of the front entrance. School had only just ended, so there weren't many other people headed straight home, but that number would steadily increase as time went on, and I wanted to leave ahead of rush hour.

But as I walked, I noticed a crowd of people standing in the courtyard. What was going on? Some kind of club recruitment?

I really needed to pick a club and get it over with. Most people would at least have narrowed down their potential candidates by now. This raised a yellow flag in my mind... How long did I have until it turned red...? *Agh, forget it! I should just get some advice from someone... but who?*

Then I overheard two older students on their way to the courtyard:

"Look! It's the CRC!"

"Wanna go check it out?"

But I didn't follow them. Instead, I headed for the gates... then came to a stop. Not for any one particular reason — I just felt like walking in a different direction. But of course, I wasn't too eager, so I ambled over slowly, approaching the outer edge of the crowd. I counted about twenty or so onlookers surrounding exactly five people, almost like this was a celebrity meet-and-greet.

"I'm Kiriyama Yui, the karate champion from the Couples' Battle Royale that everyone's been talking about... Ugh, how am I supposed to say that with a straight face?!"

"Okay then, I'll say it! This is Kiriyama Yui, the adorable angel who triumphed in the number one most vicious battle of all time! And I'm her supportive boyfriend, Aoki Yosh—"

"Kiriyama-san, you were AMAZING!"

"That battle was so awesome!"

"I hope you're feeling better now!"

"Th-Thank you... Heeheehee..."

Then the crowd started asking questions, like a swarm of reporters at a press conference. Everyone seemed to be unironically enjoying the celebrity treatment.

"Uh, g-guys? Are you listening? Because none of you are lookin' at me!"

"Great job, Yui!"

"Kiriyama-saaaaan!"

"Your match was so inspiring!"

"Aww, thanks! I'll be sure to pass it on to Chinatsu, too!"

"Don't forget about me! Aoki Yoshifumiiii!"

"Okay, my turn. I'm Inaba Himeko, finalist in the Couples' Battle Royale."

"As a spectator, it felt like she had a strategy for every battle, y'know?"

"Yeah! You could tell she knew what she was doing!"

"And this is my partner, Yaegashi Taichi."

"You mean your boyfriend?"

"Wait, so an official couple made it all the way to the final battle?"

“Wouldn’t that make them... Yamaboshi’s best couple?!”

“Hah! Old news. We’ve been Yamaboshi’s best couple for a long time.”

“Even the way she gushes about her relationship is intimidating!”

“She sounds so matter-of-fact about it... I’m not sure you can really call that *gushing*...”

“You all see it, right? My girlfriend is way too calm about this! Even I’m—”

“When’s the wedding?!”

“W-W-Wedding?! Until Taichi turns 18, we can’t legally — Wait, but that’s not too long from now!”

“Himeko! Have some sense! It’s just not realistic to think about—”

“Settle down, lovebirds!”

“You better invite me to the ceremony!”

“Okay, enough of the mushy couple! I’m the champion, Nagase Iori!”

“Nagase-saaaaan!”

“Ioriiii!”

“I love you!”

“Marry me!”

“Okay, now it *really* feels like a celebrity meet-and-greet! Anyway, as you can see, I brought with me all 300 fake flowers I won on Saturday!”

“Ooooh...”

“I really wanted to take some commemorative photos with these, but once the event ended, we all just tidied up and went home... So how about a little photo shoot?”

“Wooooo!”

“Not to sound like a broken record, but we’re all part of the Culture Research Club, or the CRC for short! How did so many CRC members place so high in the tournament? Well, for anyone who wants to hear more... Tell ‘em, Inaban!”

“Come by our clubroom, Rec Hall Room 401. Offer limited to first-years or second-years willing to change clubs.”

“So the whole thing was a promo stunt?!”

“In case you haven’t noticed, more than half of us are third-years!”

The five CRC third-years were right at home in the spotlight (for the most part), and the crowd was more than happy to play their part as well. As for me, I was nowhere close. I couldn’t believe they were serious. It felt like a well-rehearsed play, but no, it was real life.

“How’s it going?”

The sudden voice made me nearly jump out of my skin. The next thing I knew, CRC second-year Uwa Chihiro was standing right beside me.

“We... We’ve been having a real hard time with club recruitment, so we asked the third-years to pull out all the stops,” Enjouji explained as she walked up on my other side.

I hadn’t talked to many people today, so I wasn’t prepared to have a conversation. My heart thumped in my chest, and my voice faltered. A few seconds of silence passed.

“...Will this help you get new members?” I finally asked. My voice sounded low and unenthusiastic.

“Well, it’ll get more people to visit the clubroom. It’s up to us to convert them to new members from there. But we’re really cutting it close to the deadline...”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t sound too concerned. Anyway, how was your Saturday?”

“Huh? Er... I... I had plans that day... with friends... from middle school...”

The question came when I least expected it. Naturally, I was caught entirely off-guard and nearly forgot the answer I’d prepared in advance, so it came out sounding like an obvious lie.

“Ah, I see,” Uwa replied curtly. Had he seen through me? Had he lost interest in me now?

“Still... our senpai sure are cool,” Enjouji murmured to herself.

"Cool"? What's so cool about them? What's so impressive about having an easy life? I thought to myself, but I wasn't about to make myself sound like a bitter loser. Instead, I decided to just be honest.

"Yeah... They're definitely cool. On the one hand, they're tournament champions... but on the other hand, they don't seem that special. And yet I feel like I could never be like them."

Like stars in the night sky — unattainable, yet dangling right in front of me.

"But to be clear, you two give me the same vibe."

"We do?" Enjouji asked, tilting her head.

"You're pretty cool. I could never be like you."

I was willing to admit it: they were just *different*.

"What's cool about us?" Uwa asked.

I wasn't sure why they cared so much about my opinion, but nevertheless, I responded, "Because you're willing to humiliate yourselves."

"Wait, which time are you talking about? Oh god, the possibilities are endless. Kill me now."

"I mean *all* the time. Generally speaking, I could never do what you do, and it's cool."

Why did I keep saying the word "cool"? I was starting to cringe internally, although to be fair, I wasn't lying. But for some reason, the second-years blinked at me in confusion.

"D-Did you hear that, Chihiro-kun? What he said? Did he say we're cool? Did he?!"

"Will you calm down? You're embarrassing me! Anyway, wow... Guess we're cool... Heh..."

"I see that little smile on your face! So much for trying to play it cool, you loser!"

"Cram it, you!"

Then they started bickering — but in a sense, they were perfectly in sync. Were they an item?

"Ahem! Anyway, I'm surprised you see us that way."

They don't get it, I thought to myself. They were just too

different; they'd never get it. "Maybe it's hard to tell when it comes to yourself, but from my perspective, there's a massive gulf between us."

Uwa looked at me and froze. Likewise, Enjouji fell silent. Normally I never would have said something like that out loud — it just slipped out. For some reason I was willing to let my guard down around them.

But perhaps it made them uncomfortable.

"That's not true," Uwa replied flatly.

He had rejected my statement... and me along with it...

"If there's a gulf, then I used to be right there where you're standing."

Or... maybe not...?

"But I wanted to... be like *them*."

The last few words left his lips in a small voice.

"I worked hard to close that gap. So did Enjouji."

"Yup, yup. In the past, I was... Well, there wasn't anything *wrong* with me, but I was a lot different. Nothing like I am now."

She used to be different?

"But I wanted to change myself, so I did."

The look in their eyes was dead serious, yet content at the same time.

They used to be different? They used to be right where I'm standing? It was all so hard to believe. I couldn't even picture it. Was it even humanly possible to scale the wall that divided us?

Just then, some of their second-year friends walked over.

"Aren't you two gonna head over there?"

"Or are you too busy flirting?"

"We are *not* flirting," Uwa shot back.

"Nobody would spend *this* much time with someone who was *just* a clubmate... Do I detect a whiff of chemistry?"

"Nope, no chemistry here. Chihiro-kun's way too stupid for that."

"Hey! Don't you insult me! I'll bend you over right now!"

"B-B-Bend me over?! D-Did you all hear what he just said?! That's sexual harassment!"

"No, I didn't mean it! It just slipped out! I take it back!"

As they bickered, their friends started to talk amongst themselves.

"There they go again."

"He really threatened to bend her over, huh?"

"Honestly, I think it's a valid strategy to get out of the friend zone..."

"No. No it isn't."

They all talked so fast, like they didn't even stop to think about it first. In reality, they probably didn't. But at the same time, it felt like I was watching a TV show, or peering into a fictional alternate universe. Then again, they outnumbered me dramatically... so maybe *my* universe was the alternate. A fictional alternate universe that I could never escape.

"I gotta say, you two have *really* changed since last year," one of the guys said to Uwa and Enjouji.

"Yeah, totally! Especially when you think about how Uwa used to be!"

"N-No idea what you're talking about... I just needed a little time to warm up to everyone, that's all..."

"No way. I'm talking about the Sports Festival! Remember? You guys changed completely!"

"Oh man, that takes me back!"

As the others started chatting happily, I pondered this for a moment.

When they told me they worked hard to close the gap and change themselves... were they telling the truth?



Tuesday was a national holiday, so we got the day off. Then we returned to school on Wednesday. The club application deadline was Friday. I was out of time.

According to everyone I asked, most people had already submitted their forms, and many were already attending club activities as provisional members. But as for me, I was still scrutinizing all the flyers I'd received from the ten-plus clubs I'd visited.

Every now and then, someone would ask me what club I'd chosen, and I'd tell them I was still trying to decide. Then they'd ask which clubs I was torn between, and I'd list off all the clubs I visited: ping-pong, brass band, tennis, and so on. No one ever openly criticized me for failing to narrow down my candidates, but it wasn't a good thing.

Here at Yamaboshi, picking the wrong club was a critical error. And now I was terrified to make the wrong choice—

Then I realized: The bell was ringing. I looked up and checked the clock. It was past 3, and school was now over. What did I do all day long? I couldn't remember. I hadn't paid attention in any of my classes. Meanwhile, the other students all filed out of the room.

"Let's get going!"

"Uggghhh, I don't wanna do warm-ups..."

"We *just* joined and you're bored already?!"

"Guess what? Senpai's going to let us hold the instruments today!"

"Finally!"

A lot of people seemed to be headed to club practice; none of them were going straight home. They all had a goal in mind... and now I was alone, with nowhere to belong.

It was too awkward to visit any clubs now. There was only one option left: to go home. And once I got home, I needed to sit down and pick one of the clubs I'd visited, even if I had to close my eyes and pick at random.

But at this stage, the mere act of leaving campus was now a social transgression. I didn't want other people to see me going straight home, and if I didn't want to stick out, I'd have to wait around until more people left... I felt so pathetic.

What was I supposed to do? What did I *want* to do? I had waited and waited, but there was still no sign of an answer.

April had ended, and now May had begun. Soon there would be no going back.

In middle school, it had only taken about a month for the dust to settle. And as I recalled, nothing ever really changed after that. Was my high school career already set in stone?

Bit by bit, the students dwindled... and once the number of people in the room had reached a single digit, I rose to my feet.

Outside the school building, the sky was cloudless and clear. Bitterly, I cursed the sun. I hated the way it bestowed its light upon all people equally. If only I had my own personal cloud to keep me in the shade.

Meanwhile, everyone else was having a grand old time, enjoying the sunny weather with the rest of their clubs, and it made me want to *scream*. Not at anyone or anything in particular — I just wanted to fling these emotions back at the world that had inflicted them on me.

NOTICE ME! I'M RIGHT HERE!

I opened my mouth wide... but no sound came, so I closed it again. In the end, it was just a fantasy. I would never deviate from the predetermined path I was assigned to.

If I wasn't careful, my whole life would end up like this... On second thought, it would probably end up like this no matter what. I could picture it, and the mental image was funny.

I wasn't capable of change. This was simply the hand I was dealt. And now I was going home.

Along with a handful of other students, I hurried to the front gates. The peak of club recruitment season had long since passed, and the road was quiet... but there were still two people handing out flyers.

"Join the CRC!"

"If... if there's anyone who's still undecided, feel free to come check us out!"

It was Uwa and Enjouji from the Cultural Research Club. As I walked straight toward the gates, our eyes naturally met.

I didn't want them asking me any questions, so instead I took the initiative myself.

"How did it go on Monday?"

"Well... we had a lot of fun with our senpai and all the people who visited," Enjouji answered. But the gloomy look on her face told me everything I needed to know.

"But no one decided to join? Wait, but... isn't that a major problem?"

Why was I worried when it was none of my business? Maybe I just wanted to commiserate.

"To be clear, we *do* have some prospects," Uwa cut in hastily. "We just don't have any clear confirmation from anyone. After all, the forms get submitted to the teachers, not to us."

"That, and we haven't exactly been forceful about making people join us... We've just left the decision up to them..."

I could feel their struggle, but their strange sense of duty seemed to be causing more harm than good. If they simply sat back and let the students come to them, they'd inevitably lose those potential members to other clubs who were more aggressive. Sure, a lot of people had a clear-cut idea of what kind of club they wanted, but it was still fairly common for people to join a club on the spur of the moment — because it seemed fun, or because their friends joined.

"You're allowed to be a little more aggressive, you know. The third-years all seem really popular. If you start pushing people around a little more, you'll get the numbers you need to keep the club alive."

Why was I having this conversation with them? I didn't understand.

"No. That's not acceptable," Enjouji argued. "If they only join because *we* want them to, they won't have a fun time."

"...Aren't your members supposed to craft their own fun?"

Isn't that how your whole club works?" I asked sarcastically. But Uwa took my words at face value.

"Yes, that's true. The CRC is a place where you can discover your true passions. But you have to *want* to look for them, or else... it won't really work out."

Their club had practically zero structure, and yet they talked as though there were some unspoken rules. Once again, I found myself wondering: *What exactly is the point of this club?*

"Honestly, I don't expect anyone to understand what the CRC is."

"Then why did you join it?"

I had to ask. What else could I have said?

"Because I saw the potential."

"Was it those five third-years?"

"Yeah... Well, no, maybe not."

"Wait, what? It wasn't them?" asked Enjouji.

"I mean, sure, I saw the potential in them, and in the club itself. But looking back, more than anything, I saw the potential in *myself*."

Inner potential?

"After all, the world is what you make of it," Uwa grinned, and I could tell he believed every word.

"Oh god! Chihiro-kun's acting like he conveniently forgot the part where he made an ass of himself, then got schooled by the rest of us! Just look at that arrogant — OW!"

I told them I'd forgotten something back in the classroom, then turned back and hurried to the school building, staring down at the ground as I walked.

I couldn't bring myself to go home. Uwa's voice kept reverberating in my head: *potential*. What "potential"? I'd been looking for new potential the whole time, but then it never freaking showed up. So where the hell was it? In other people? In the school? In the clubs? In myself? Where was I supposed to go?

I was pretty much just wandering aimlessly. And since I didn't have a set destination, I followed the path I was most accustomed to, leading me right back to my classroom.

The halls were dim and practically empty. What was the point in me going back there? Would I find something? No way. If something was there, surely I would have found it by now—

Then, I saw the light.

It wasn't a flipped switch, nor was it a shift in the sun's rays. A lone girl was walking my way, her long, silky hair fluttering with the motions.

Friendly-yet-firm eyes, a well-defined nose, porcelain skin, and a slender, perfectly proportioned body. She was flawless in every way — and not just physically, either. She radiated an aura of determination and inner strength. This was no damsel in distress. She was a queen. And it made her all the more radiant.

It was Nagase Iori.

Normally it was impossible for the human body to glow without an external light source, and yet she lit up the room. I saw it with my own two eyes.

She was in a league of her own. Not only was she the most beautiful girl at Yamaboshi, but she was the champion of a schoolwide tournament, too. If she was the sun, then I was a weed growing in the shade, if that. I wasn't even sure I had the right to speak to her.

I had met her once, back when I visited the Cultural Research Club. I'd introduced myself to her, too. But she had met dozens of first-years in the time since then, so she probably didn't remember a total wallflower like me.

I stared at the floor and averted my gaze. I didn't want to make her feel awkward, so I didn't get my hopes up.

"Katou Takumi-kun!"

For a minute, I wasn't sure who had spoken to me. Then I looked up... looked over my shoulder... and realized we were the only two people in this hallway.

“Uh, hello? I’m talking to you, silly! Wait... Did I get your name wrong?”

“No, it’s Katou.”

“I knew it! You came by with those four other guys from your class, right? ...Wait, why do you look all shocked?”

“You... remember me?”

“Now hold on a darn minute! You think I’m some kinda coldhearted monster? I mean, I literally had a conversation with you! Of course I’d remember!”

“But it was just one conversation...”

“Yeah, so? ...Oh, that reminds me! I think it was the day before you came to visit — you got glomped by poor Shino-chan while she was handing out flyers, didn’t you? Heehee!”

“What? How do you know about that...?”

“Because she was super embarrassed about it! She was like, ‘Have I violated that boy’s boundaries?!’” Nagase snickered. “And after you visited, she was like, ‘He wouldn’t even look me in the eye!’ Oh, but I wouldn’t recommend falling for her if I were you. She might seem cute and vulnerable, but she keeps her guard up at all times. The only one who can slip past it is Chee-hee... if he’s lucky.”

When I visited their clubroom, I was so sure Enjouji had forgotten about me... but in truth, she hadn’t at all. The only reason she didn’t comment on it was because she was embarrassed.

“What’s going on with those two, anyway...? Oh, right. So what club did you end up picking?”

“...I haven’t decided yet.”

“Ah, the struggles of youth! I’m curious to know if the CRC is an option you’re considering... but I won’t ask! I have faith in Chee-hee and Shino-chan!”

She pointed straight ahead, as if to command me forward.

“Fly high, new kid! ...Anyway, I’ll be seeing ya!”

And with a devilish grin, she continued past me down the hall. Wordlessly, I inclined my head. Her smile told me that she wasn’t just being polite — she really did hope to see me

again. But of course, it was possible it was only a carefully crafted veneer... No, it couldn't be.

I had believed Nagase Iori wouldn't remember me, but she did. And Enjouji Shino remembered me, too. Just like that, my world had been turned upside-down. My worst fears were only ever figments of my imagination. The opportunities were always right there — I just chose to believe they weren't.

...Now that I thought about it, this happened to me a lot, didn't it? I was always mourning the fact that opportunities never seemed to come along, but in hindsight...

When I spotted a couple of classmates on my way to school, I could have said hello to them instead of averting my gaze. Maybe it would have led to something.

When my classmates teased me for my run-in with Enjouji that one morning, I could have laughed it off. It would have made for a funny joke.

When I was invited to join the ping-pong club, I could have at least talked to him about it instead of shooting him down. I could have made up for my failure the first time around by going out of my way to ask him about it the next time.

When I visited the Cultural Research Club with those four other guys, I could have talked to them about it. It was a memory we all shared, was it not?

When the clubs were going out to recruit, I could have interacted with them more actively. Any of them would surely be happy to have me.

When the rest of the class was talking about meeting up to play volleyball, I could have agreed to participate instead of searching for a way out. No one was trying to get rid of me.

When that ridiculous Couples' Battle Royale was going on, I could have at least showed up. Maybe I would have found a partner. Or even if I didn't participate, I could have used that as an excuse to talk to people and hear their

thoughts about it.

And now that I was struggling to choose a club, I could have asked someone for advice. Maybe that way I could have narrowed down my candidates.

Looking back, at any given moment, there were *dozens* of chances to change the status quo. I could have pounced on them, but instead I passed them all up.

No more “It’s too late now.” No more “It’s hopeless.”

I changed my destination and cut across the courtyard. Starting now, I was going to choose to believe that it *wasn’t* too late — in fact, it was the perfect time.

I could hear the sounds of the brass band, plus the twang of a guitar — garage band club, maybe. The shouts of the rugby team echoed loudly across the athletic field.

Club activities, everywhere I looked.

No matter what happened, Uwa and Enjouji would never give up on the Cultural Research Club. It surely wasn’t easy for them, and yet they kept pushing forward... and that was how they created opportunities for themselves.

Step one: notice that the opportunity is there. Step two: make something out of it. Uwa and Enjouji had accomplished both of these things. Maybe they were right; maybe they were clueless at first, but by following in the third-years’ footsteps, they had changed themselves for the better.

What would my life be like if I joined the Cultural Research Club? Well, I’d be able to tell my classmates about it. And since the club activities weren’t set in stone, it was full of unlimited potential. The only things set in stone was the “Culture Bulletin,” whatever that was, and the presence of my senpai. Uwa and Enjouji seemed funny and interesting — kind of distant, but kind of relatable, too.

The more I thought about the Cultural Research Club, the more interested I became. Why follow some prescribed guidelines when I could craft my own fun? It was an exciting prospect.

Then I arrived at the old building. *Yikes, talk about rickety. This place looks like it needs some earthquake retrofitting.*

One by one, I climbed the stairs. Were the second-years already up there? Or were they still handing out flyers?

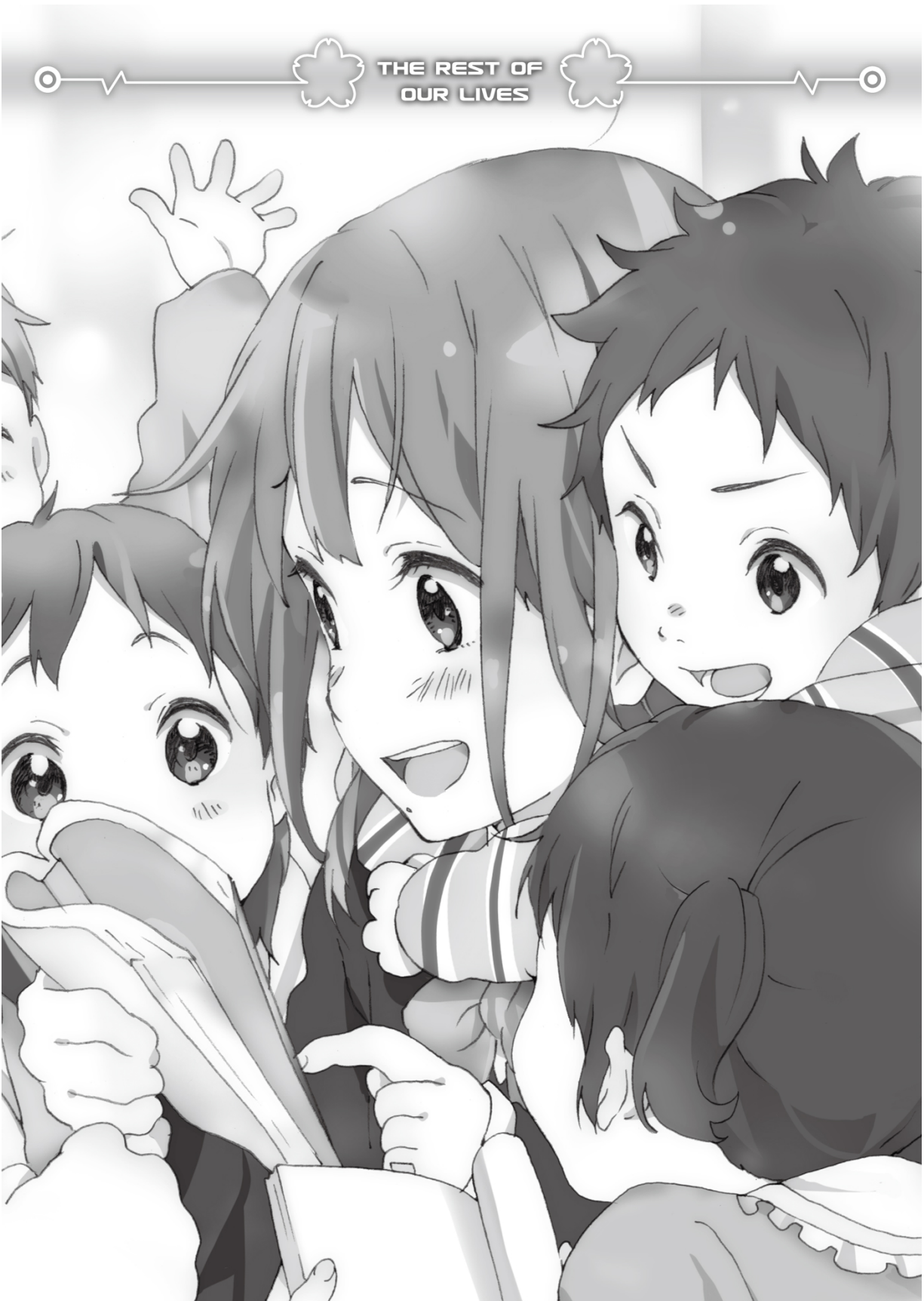
With each step taken, my heart pounded a tiny bit harder until my whole body was tense. Normally this feeling would have rooted me to the spot, but right now? It felt *good*. It was this energy that spurred me forward... and frankly, I needed it. Because chances were good I was about to make a total ass of myself.

But even then, it probably wouldn't be so bad.

I wasn't going to change, or find opportunities, or reach potential, just by sitting around. These things weren't going to come knocking at my door of their own accord; I needed to get out there and hunt them down myself.

This was undeniably the first step.

And so I, Katou Takumi, knocked on the door to Rec Hall Room 401...



The Rest of Our Lives

First, there was the third and final Sports Festival of my high school career. Fellow 3-A classmate Kiriya Yui used her super-athlete powers to win a bunch of events (to the point that the other teams complained about her being in so many of them). Additionally, an athletic all-girl squad consisting of Kurihara Yukina, Oosawa Misaki, and yours truly, Nagase Iori (among others) went on to win enough points to ensure victory for White Team.

Then there was summer break — one that I didn't fully enjoy due to everyone going on and on about how "summer is an essential time for college entrance exams." That said, obviously I could understand why, and I was grateful to my teachers for instilling in me the value of studying. And we did sneak in one quick beach trip, so I guess it wasn't all bad.

Then, on top of everything else that was going on that summer, it was time to start prepping for the Culture Festival. I was cast as the female lead in an original play, and I received some truly humbling compliments, praising my acting chops and encouraging me to pursue a career in television. Seriously, very flattering.

And after that, it was time for us third-years to plunge headfirst into true entrance exam hell... which meant formally retiring from the Cultural Research Club. That said, we were still allowed to visit every now and then, so for me, it didn't really *feel* like I'd retired at all. *I'm not overstaying my welcome, I swear!*

Then, in November, we reached a turning point. Autumn turned to winter, and like the falling snow, our almost-adult lives became buried in an all-encompassing blanket of

studying, studying, and more studying. We no longer had any time to hang out with friends. No more classes, no more structured learning — just independent study and exam prep. But was it healthy for us to be so desperately laser-focused on one specific thing?

For me, the hallowed halls of Yamaboshi held so many memories. High school was a magical time in my life, made all the more thrilling thanks to a few supernatural events that will go unnamed. It was so much fun, and I wouldn't change a thing about it. But for some reason, as I watched my world turn white, I couldn't help but mourn.

I knew all things had to end eventually. Especially high school — when you thought about it, it only lasted for *three measly years*. I just... didn't want it to end like *this*, you know? Not that I had any regrets, but—

"Hey there, Iori. What's up?" asked Setouchi Kaoru, her cartilage piercings and chin-length hair affording her a mature, sexy vibe.

"Not much, Kaoru-chan! Just wandering through the halls, pretty much!"

"How are you wandering around at a time like this? Wait... *Riiiiight!*" She clapped her hands together in understanding. "I forgot things are different for you. Must be nice to get into college on recommendation... And it's your dream college, too..."

"I just got lucky, I guess!"

"It's more than just luck. You put in a lot of effort, too, both in school *and* during the Couples' Battle Royale. You've earned it."

"What about you? Somewhere in S Prefecture, wasn't it?"

"Yep! I'm looking to major in urban sociology. I read this incredible book by a university professor and decided I just *had* to attend her classes!"

"That's awesome, girl! Rock on!"

"I don't know about *awesome*, per se... Honestly, it's a tiny bit out of my league..."

“Man, what if you went to all the effort of applying there only for that professor to go get a job somewhere else? That would suck.”

“Oh my god, Iori! Don’t jinx me!”

But of course, she knew I was just joking. We shared a laugh, then went our separate ways. As she headed off to the library to study, she sparkled like a diamond... What would it be like to see Yamaboshi through her eyes?

When I grew up, I wanted to be a teacher.

Elementary school? Middle school? High school? Kindergarten? Or maybe just a children’s counselor? I was hoping to figure out the small stuff *after* I got there, but at the very least, I had a general idea of what I wanted. And after factoring in my desired major, location, scholarship money, and everything else, I finally settled on one particular school that seemed the most ideal. They offered a special recommendation entrance exam, so I figured I’d give it a shot on the side while doing my regular studying, and wouldn’t you know it — I passed with flying colors.

And with that, the tale of Nagase Iori’s college prep came to an end (but I figured I should probably keep studying a little bit in the meantime while I waited for graduation to roll around). I had made it into my first choice college, and on a scholarship, too. This way I wouldn’t put too much of a burden on my mom. Objectively speaking, everything was coming up roses for me.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. Still plenty of time left, so I decided to keep wandering. Just then, as I passed Classroom 3-E, I spotted two familiar faces: Yaegashi Taichi and Inaba Himeko, sitting with their desks facing each other, studying. These days, they were Yamaboshi’s most infamous power couple.

Mischievously, I watched them through the crack in the door.

“Screw it, Taichi. I’m done trying to memorize historical

dates.”

“What do you mean, you’re done? That’s the easiest part!”

“I mean, sure, it’d be great if I could memorize them. But as long as you have a grasp of the correlation between Japanese history and world history, you can answer pretty much any question the test throws at you. So I don’t *need* to memorize them.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t try.”

“Hey, dumbass, did you even see the sample questions? There were only three or four that asked for specific dates. Why invest all that effort for next to no benefit? I’m not saying I refuse to memorize any at all, but I’m not going to go out of my way to prep for it. Not like we’re going to have to do a second round of tests.”

“Are you seriously talking about *investment versus return* right now?”

“Look, we only have so many hours in a day, alright? We have to prioritize some things at the expense of others. If you start at the beginning of the workbook and just do the problems one by one like a total amateur, you’ll never have enough time!”

“Wh... How did you get that far ahead of me?!”

“I’m just skipping over the problems I don’t need to worry about.”

A cunning woman, dating a painfully honest man... *God, I can totally picture him overthinking the first question and running out of time.*

“Okay then, help me figure out what to prioritize.”

“Well, obviously it varies from person to person... But in *your* case, you definitely want to pay attention to the sections here and here...”

“Whoa... You know, Himeko, you never cease to amaze me.”

“Damn right. I know *all* your faults, flaws, and weaknesses.”

“Are... are you saying I have a lot, or...?”

But in the end, the power of love would help them make it through. *Totes jelly.*

“So. Why are *you* here?”

Out of nowhere, Inaban turned her sharp glare on me. Reflexively, I hid behind the door.

“I know you’re there, genius,” she shouted at me in annoyance.

“Wahaha...”

With an awkward grin, I slipped into the room. It was much warmer in here compared to the chilly hallway — unexpected, considering all that separated them was a single door.

“Oh, I just wanted to come check on you and see how you were doing...”

“We’re halfway through December now, coming up on the last stretch of exam prep, and a certain *someone* is starting to give me an ulcer.”

“I’m sorry...” Taichi slumped his shoulders.

“Well, worst case scenario, you can always take the year off and start college late.”

They were both applying to the same school — Taichi majoring in biological sciences and Inaban majoring in electronic engineering.

“Hell no. Why would I want to be Taichi’s senpai? ...On second thought, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad...”

“I don’t know what you’re imagining, but it’s not happening.”

“Maybe you should practice calling her ‘Inaba-senpai’ in advance. Oh, wait — it’d be ‘Himeko-senpai,’ wouldn’t it?”

“Et tu, Nagase?!”

Whenever I was talking to Taichi, I couldn’t help but try to get a rise out of him.

“Aw, I’m just joking! You guys are gonna ace it. With the power of love.”

“Hmph... We’ll see...”

"I don't know..."

And just like that, they both started blushing and smiling.
Pushovers, I tell ya.

"Welp, I'll let you guys get back to it. Fare thee well!"

I didn't want to interrupt their hard work. Thus, I turned and headed out of the room.

"Thanks a million, Himeko. I swear, I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You say that, but... honestly, you help *me* a lot more than I help *you*."

"Uh, guys? When I said 'get back to it,' I meant *studying*, not flirting!"

"JUST GO!" they both shouted in unison.

If by some chance they *did* fail their entrance exams, the reason was guaranteed to be "distracted by love," but I knew they were smarter than that, and I trusted them to exercise some restraint.

On my way out, I checked the clock on the classroom wall.
Still some time left. Guess I'll keep walking around campus.

Our school was known for its laid-back, fun-loving atmosphere, but we still knew when to put our noses to the grindstone. During this time of year, studying took place not just in the library and designated study areas, but in the classrooms, too. There were even people studying at the tables and benches set up just outside the staff room.

"Y'know, Yui, I still don't get the formula they want me to use for this problem. I'm gonna go ask sensei one more time!"

"Don't! Please, have mercy! If she finds out there's still a third-year at this school who hasn't learned basic algebra, she'll cry for hours!"

"Wait, but... Is it really that bad...?"

"It's bad. It's, like, reeeally bad. It's so, so bad."

"Oh god, Yui's turned into a broken record!"

It was Aoki Yoshifumi, a rowdy guy who loved to stand out, and Kiriya Yui, a girl whose natural talents *made* her

stand out whether she wanted to or not. They were a fairly infamous couple in these parts, and today they seemed to be having a fun time. *Uh, guys? Shouldn't you be taking this seriously?*

"Oh my *god*, Iori! You'll never believe this!" Yui called out as soon as she laid eyes on me. "Turns out Aoki might not be able to *graduate high school*, let alone pass a college entrance exam!"

"No, that's not true! Gossan said so! And he's my class advisor, so he would know!"

You see, in Class 3-A, our advisor was one Gotou Ryuuzen.

"Yeah, but... it's *Gossan*," I replied with an uncertain frown.

"...Oh god, you're right!"

He wasn't a bad guy, but he was *notoriously* incompetent.

"Maybe you should double-check with a different teacher... Crap, I need to be focused on my own work!"

"You said you gotta talk to someone about your math scores, right? How bad is it?"

"I... I'm fine, okay?! Unlike *you*, I picked a college that's kind of hard to get into!"

"I mean, math isn't *that* important for the humanities course, but you still have to reach a certain threshold, or you might not qualify..."

"Mind your own business!"

Yui was planning to pursue a foreign language program, while Aoki was trying to major in business, believe it or not. Ultimately, they were planning to enroll at two different colleges... and if everything worked out according to plan, they would inevitably part ways.

"Hnn... Man, I can only imagine how your parents must be feeling right about now."

"Yeah, no kidding. I mean, my little sister's even dumber than I am... Hey, wait a minute!"

"So tell me, Yui, are you feeling better these days?"

"Well, everyone kept commenting about how 'depressed' I

looked, so..."

Yui's mood swings had gotten a little dramatic lately, possibly from the pressure of college prep.

"My folks tried their damndest to make sure I could go to college. I'mma do it for them! And for my big sister, too! No gap year for me, no sirree!" Aoki declared.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I do believe this man is serious! I can see the fire burning in his eyes!" I shouted in a theatrical voice.

Obviously I wanted *all* my friends to be able to pursue their dreams, but I couldn't help but relate especially hard to the Aoki family's financial situation. *Hang in there, buddy.*

"Anyway, don't mind me. I'll see myself out."

"Awww, you're leaving? Girl, we should hang out sometime!"

"We will! Just as soon as you ace your exams."

And by the time I parted ways with them, it was finally time for my rendezvous.

When he asked me when I would be available to talk, I chose a time between the end of the school day and before campus closed. Our meetup location: a blind spot out behind the East Wing.

Come to think of it, this was the same place where I once spied on a romantic confession between Aoki and Yui.

"Sorry about that. Were you waiting long?"

"Nope! I only just got here myself."

Not long after I arrived, student council president and fellow student representative Katori Jouji jogged over.

With perfect looks, talent in both schoolwork and sports, and innate charisma, he had won over a majority of the student body during his time in office. And with a great personality, there was really nothing more anyone could want in a guy. Not only that, but rumor had it he'd already ranked in the 90th percentile at a prestigious elite university. He was basically flawless.

Supposedly he used to date someone from a different school, but at some point this year I overheard some gossip that they'd broken things off.

"Smart cookie that you are, you may have already figured it out, but..."

"Smart cookie that I am, I tend to figure out a lot of stuff. What's up?"

"...Right. I suppose I need to be direct about it."

He didn't seem scared or nervous, but he didn't seem cocky, either — a rare breed.

"What say you and I go on a date sometime?" he asked, casually running a hand through his hair. I could tell he wasn't putting on airs, and his natural confidence was attractive.

My skin tingled, and my heart churned.

"Why?"

Was it rude of me to ask? Still, I wanted to know.

"Because I have feelings for you... and because I think it might be fun."

The second part was probably his real reason. I could tell he had yet to discover the real Nagase Iori.

After winning the Couples' Battle Royale, he and I had been selected as "student representatives" of Yamaboshi High School. In practice, this meant we were obligated to give speeches whenever there was some important event. It was by no means hard work, and supposedly it looked great on my academic records or whatever, but anyway. As a result, I naturally ended up spending a lot more time with Katori, and I had sensed that he was starting to take an interest in me. Less of a crush and more like innocent curiosity, if I had to guess.

"Okay, and you waited until December of our third year to ask?"

"Well, this is my last chance, is it not? And it's not like it would be much of a distraction, since you don't need to worry about college prep anymore."

Dating was generally a pretty big deal for us teenagers. Supposedly it could change your whole life. Katori still had studying to do, so he wouldn't be able to hang out that often, but maybe having a boyfriend would add some rosy color to this whitewashed world.

Was it time to put the brush to the canvas and see what sort of picture we could paint together?

"If you need time to think about it, I don't mind waiting."

"I'm really flattered. Especially coming from a guy as great as you."

I'd been through this a dozen times before, but it never got any easier. My blood always ran cold, and my heart always ached. It never, ever came naturally to me.

"It's just... I'm sorry, but I can't."

I couldn't pretend I didn't hesitate, but in the end, the answer was always the same. Katori was a charming, attractive guy, but as fun as it might be to hang out with him... I couldn't imagine myself ever falling for him.

He looked at me in mild surprise.

"Uhhh, I mean, to be clear, there's nothing wrong with you or anything!" I continued hastily.

"No, no, it's fine. I don't need you to sugarcoat it," he laughed, waving a hand dismissively. "I had a feeling this was coming."

"Sorry."

"Please don't apologize. You'll make me feel bad."

"Right... Sure thing."

"I was thinking we might have a fun time together, but you disagree. That's all there is to it."

"...You just don't want to accept that you got rejected, do you?"

"Quit reading my mind!"

"Wahaha! I bet this is your first time getting shot down, huh?"

"My *second*, actually. So if you think you'll always be my 'girl who got away,' then think again!"

“Gee, want some fries to go with all that salt?”

“Urk...”

“I don’t consider myself to have high standards or anything, but... man, whoever I *do* end up with is gonna have to work their ass off if they’re gonna be better than you.”

“Not sure when that will be, but I eagerly await the day.”

And with that, we set off in opposite directions.

This was purely supposition on my part, but... something told me Katori was concerned about me staying single this long. Not to suggest he had only asked me out as a pity gesture, but I could sense a hint of “what’s wrong with you?” in his tone.

What’s wrong with me? Good question.



The next morning was easily twice as cold as the last, and the cozy warmth of the heated classroom made me want to doze off before first period even started.

“Mmnehhh... It’s so nice and warm...” I murmured lazily.

“Yeahhh...” Oosawa Misaki replied from the desk in front of mine.

Misaki was a track star with boyish short hair — but I knew she had a cute, feminine side, too. She was the perfect balance of honest and kind, and I found her really easy to talk to.

“You know, Misaki-chan, I’ve been feeling kinda emo lately.”

“Oh yeah?”

Out of nowhere, the classroom door flew open, and Kurihara Yukina ran in.

“Red alert! Red alert! You’re coming with me, missy! You, too, Misaki!”

She grabbed me by the arm and hauled me to my feet.

“Whoa there! Yukina-chan, what’s gotten into you?!”

Yukina was one of Misaki's track team buddies, and right now, she was in a tizzy. Every now and then she'd completely flip out, and it was always about the same thing...

"Come on! We're taking this outside!"

"Alright, I hear ya! Just calm d— Jeez, it's cold!"

The moment we left the classroom, it felt like she'd dragged me into a walk-in freezer. She proceeded to lead me all the way to the far corner of the hall.

"How is it still this cold inside the building...?" I wondered aloud.

But just then, Yukina slammed me up against the wall.

"Katori Jouji asked you out and you said NO?!" she hissed in her trademark "indoor screaming" voice.

Whoa now, you're in my bubble!

"I mean, yeah... Wait, but how do you know about that?"

Surely Katori wouldn't go telling people he got rejected, right?

"When it comes to that kind of gossip, there are sources everywhere."

Ah, so the walls have ears. Got it.

"What's not to like about him? What exactly will it take for you to date someone? Like, at this point I'm convinced you've gotta be in love with someone else! So who is it, huh? Someone who's already taken? I know it's not easy to let go of those feelings, but you're wasting your life, Iori!"

"Sorry to rain on your rapid-fire parade this morning, but it's not like that."

In love with someone else. Someone who's already taken.

For the briefest of moments, the words brought Yaegashi Taichi to mind.

"I'm just not in a rush to jump into a relationship with anyone."

"Oh my godddd. You wanna know why you're so emotional lately? This is why!"

"Oh, you heard that?"

“Listen, you’re just hor— Ow!”

“Sorry, Yukina, but I can’t let you scream about sex in the middle of the hall this early in the morning.”

“Yeah! You tell her, Misaki-chan! Don’t conflate my complicated teenage feelings with your perpetual thirst!”

“B-But... Look, it drives me crazy whenever I hear about you turning everybody down! You’ve already got your college stuff figured out, so what’s the harm in enjoying the rest of high school while you can? Romance is literally the only thing you’re missing! It’s the final piece of the puzzle!”

“Not for everybody, Yukina. Anyway, class is about to start, so let’s get back to our seats. But to be clear, Iori, if there’s something getting you down, then you should try to fix it. You’ve got plenty of time until graduation, after all.”

Naturally, Misaki was completely right. As for Yukina, well... I was pretty sure it *wasn’t* a lack of romance that was making me sad, but if so, then what could it be?

There was a vague discomfort in my chest that I couldn’t put my finger on. My high school experience was overall pretty awesome so far, and yet I could feel the color slowly draining out of it. Was I sad? Lonely? Unfulfilled? Regretting something? I wasn’t sure.

All I knew was that I didn’t want to carry this feeling all the way to graduation... and so I decided to go on a little journey.

That day I messaged Nakayama Mariko, asking to catch up. She suggested we grab lunch together. So I apologized to my usual lunch group (Yui, Yukina, and Misaki) and headed off to the cafeteria.

“So what’s up? Why’d you wanna talk all of a sudden?” Nakayama asked, blowing on her steaming hot udon. Like always, she was a bundle of energy. Maybe she stored it in her pigtails.

“Sorry to spring it on you. It’s nothing serious, I promise.”

“Oh, I get it now! You didn’t want advice — you just

missed your beloved Mariko-san! Man, your curry smells good. Clearly I made the wrong choice."

I scooped up a spoonful of rice along with my curry and slid it into my mouth. The cafeteria was packed and noisy, like always.

"Tell me, Nakayama-chan. What's life been like since you got a boyfriend?"

"Mega-ultra-different!" she grinned. Then she stopped and tilted her head in confusion, her chopsticks still between her lips. "Is *that* what you wanted to talk about?"

"I mean, it doesn't have to be that specifically..."

Personally, I regretted not getting the udon. I was in the mood for something lighter, like soup broth.

"How's college prep?"

"...Well, I'm trying," she replied wearily, slurping up her noodles.

From the look on her face, I got the sense that she didn't really want to talk about it... but then she continued.

"You'll never believe this, Iori. I'm trying to major in humanities, right? But I can't get my language scores to go up! Slrrrrppp!"

"Oh. Gosh, that sucks."

"Ishikawa-kun wasn't doing so great either, since he was spending so much time on baseball instead of studying. But now that he's retired from the team, his scores have skyrocketed! Me, on the other hand..."

Somehow I wasn't surprised. Her boyfriend, Ishikawa Daiki, always seemed like the kind of guy who could do well at school if he put more time into it.

"Maybe he could tutor you?"

"He took the science course, so our homework is mostly pretty different..."

Hmm. At this rate, you might be doomed.

"Oh, hey! If it isn't Sone-kun and Miyagami-kun!" I called, changing the focus of conversation, as they passed by.

"Hm? Oh, h-hey, Nagase-san..."

“And Nakayama-san!”

They both looked a little flustered. *Relax, guys, I won't bite.* They were both carrying sandwiches — probably on their way back to the classroom.

“Hey there! So, uhhh... I know the year's almost over, but have either of you been on any dates lately?”

“We'll be single till the day we graduate!” they shouted back in unison, which was pretty impressive. *Glad I asked.*

“Aww, c'mon. You guys don't know that for sure.”

“Just stop, Nagase-san. We've already pledged our lives to studying. Don't lead us astray.”

“He's right, Nagase-san! Sone's struggling through entrance exam hell with 2D girls as his only solace!”

“...Miyagami, you're not helping, man.”

“So, uh, do you wish things were different?” Nakayama asked, unaware of what a gut-punch it was.

“Do I? Of course I do! I'm gonna go my whole life without ever dating a high school girl! I wanted to enjoy that uniform, damn it!”

“Dude, shut up. You sound like a creep.”

“You could still date one in college, couldn't you?” asked Nakayama.

“Sure I could! But I'd probably go to jail!”

“Alas...”

And so Miyagami and Sone began to (fake) cry. But then, Miyagami stopped and pointed.

“Look, Sone! It's the enemy!”

There stood Shiroyama Shouto, former jazz band member, with his girlfriend Setouchi Kaoru. From the looks of it, they had bumped into each other in passing.

“One minute he's talking about going to law school, and the next, he's suddenly applying to the same school as his girlfriend!” Sone complained.

“But aren't you two going to the same college, too?” Nakayama pointed out.

“W-We'll be fine! Don't worry! We're late bloomers, but

we'll figure it out in college!" Miyagami exclaimed.

"Right! We're going to make the most of campus life!"

They slung an arm around each other's shoulders, propping each other up.

"Anyway, we've got sandwiches to eat."

"Just us guys."

"Dude, don't say that part!"

And off they went. It seemed they had ultimately decided to commit themselves to studying, and I was happy for them... Then a question occurred to me.

"What college are they applying to, anyway?"

"Sone-kun wants to major in law at D University. As for Miyagami-kun, I heard he was trying to get into the Department of Intercultural Studies at H University."

"Wow, that's awesome. They must be really working hard."

"Yeah, but apparently they didn't do so great on the mock test the other day. But to be clear, lori, you've been working hard, too! I mean, you already got into your dream college! You're chasing your dreams!"

"Aww, thanks. You're too kind, my dear."

Chasing my dreams?

"Real talk, you've had the perfect life! I admire you."

Perfect? Someone with a "perfect" life wouldn't end their high school career on this sour note.

"Well, to be honest, part of the reason I wanted to talk to you is because things *aren't* going so perfectly right now."

"What do you mean? I mean, sure, you never dated anyone, but that stuff doesn't bother you, right?"

"Right."

That much was true, from the bottom of my heart. Maybe my life would have been more fun with a boyfriend, but I didn't regret it or anything.

"It's just... lately I've been feeling miserable, and I can't put my finger on why."

Even I'm not perfect.

“A case of mystery sadness, huh? Maybe you’re having second thoughts! Once your college plans are set in stone, it can be easy to get cold feet, y’know?”

Was I having second thoughts about my plans? I never stopped to consider it, but now that I thought about it, I probably should have. After all, this would determine my entire future, so it couldn’t hurt to think it over. Especially since the path ahead was essentially set in stone for those pursuing a career in education.

“Good grief. Talk about a first-world problem... Must be nice if that’s all you have to worry about!”

Was I privileged to struggle with this? Or was I struggling because other people saw me as privileged?

I had a feeling no one knew the answer to this question.

After school, I decided to visit the Rec Hall for a change. My destination: Room 401, home to the Cultural Research Club.

I climbed up the stairs and stood in front of the door. I always used to bounce right in, but not anymore. This club didn’t belong to me now. I was a guest here.

I knocked on the door, waited for permission, then opened it.

“Good morning, Iori-senpai!” shouted one Enjouji Shino.

“Good morning!” chorused the six other members.

“...Since when did Shino-chan turn into a little drill sergeant?”

“She’s not. She just beat us to it, that’s all,” replied Uwa Chihiro, my successor to the title of club president.

I had arrived a little late, so the whole club was present. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of the second-years, there were now five first-year members: Katou Takumi and two other guys from his class, plus two girls. All of them looked happy to be here.

This year, in addition to the Culture Bulletin, the CRC was pursuing new avenues of research. Apparently Shino-chan

had roped them all into a long-distance relay race just last week... *Seriously, the girl's actually turning into a drill sergeant!*

"I gotta say, I love to see the club so vibrant and full of life! As former president, I couldn't be prouder!"

"What brings you here, Nagase-san? Planning to laze around again?"

"Wow! Is that how you talk to your esteemed senpai?!"

"Sh-She's right, Chihiro-kun! You know lori-senpai has nothing better to do these days!"

"Wha?! Don't say it like that! You make me sound like a loser!"

"Oh, um, I'm sorry! What I meant was, er... you have a lot of free time!"

"That's not an improvement, Shino-chan!"

Naturally, the second-years bullied me mercilessly. Frankly, they weren't wrong; compared to everyone else still studying, I *did* have a lot of free time... Was *that* why I felt so off? Because I was bored? Hopefully not, because otherwise I would feel like a total pathetic baby for complaining.

"Seriously though, why are you here?"

"...I just wanted to check in with you for a little bit... Is that a crime, Chee-hee...?"

"No, it's not. You're more than welcome to. I was joking, alright? Please don't feel bad. We've been wanting to talk to you, anyway."

"L-Let's change plans for today and listen to lori-senpai's special lecture instead! How about it, everyone?"

"Yeah! I totally wanna hear more about lori-senpai!"

"Yes, please!"

"Go for it."

Even the first-years were nice to me... although I could tell they were just being polite. *Maybe I really am overstaying my welcome.*

A considerate first-year grabbed a folding chair for me. Gratefully, I sat.

"First, about your college plans," Chihiro began. "You see, I chose the science course, and Enjouji's in the humanities course. We're both interested in going to college, but neither of us have a clear vision of our future."

"Right, of course. Your future together."

"Don't phrase it like that."

"I mean, you might as well hook u— Ack! I'm sorry, Chee-hee! Please don't push my chair out of the room!"

Apparently I crossed a line with that one.

"I still have no idea what I want to be when I grow up... That's why I was hoping I could get some advice from someone who's got it all figured out!"

"...I mean, I don't have *everything* figured out..."

"You got into a university of education on recommendation, right?" asked one of the first-years.

"Yeah, basically."

"So your dream is to be a teacher? How did you decide that?"

The word *dream* made me feel a little bashful.

"Well... There have been times in my life when I had a lot of problems and couldn't find the answers."

I was lost. Wandering. Searching.

"In the end, it took a lot of help from other people to finally reach a solution. But I figure there's probably a lot of kids out there like me — kids who just can't hack it. And if you ask me, all they really need is a helping hand. So I wanna be the kind of teacher who can guide her students."

"Ooooh," the crowd murmured. *Aww, shucks, you guys!*

"Teacher, huh? I heard it's really hard and pays like crap. But if that's what you love, then hey."

One of the first-years was rather opinionated on the subject.

"Yeah, I heard it's totally not worth it."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm sure you'd be an awesome teacher, but it almost feels like your skills would be wasted in a job like that. I mean, you could be an actress!"

“You’ve been saying that ever since you saw her perform at the Culture Festival.”

“Because it’s true! She’s so good, she could change the world!”

“Hmmm... Going to a university of education would really limit your options...”

Your skills would be wasted. You’re so good, you could change the world. Limit your options. Believe it or not, these words resonated with me, and my heart wavered.

At this stage, I wasn’t planning to change my mind or change course. But... the more I insisted to myself about what my *plans* were, the more it proved just how uncertain I was. For a third-year, I was pretty pathetic.

Everyone else in the room was shining so bright, they darkened my shadows. Was I shining, too? When I asked myself this question, I found I couldn’t answer it with full confidence, despite the wonderful high school career I’d enjoyed thus far. What was wrong with me?

Minutes after I left the CRC clubroom, I found myself back in my classroom, sitting face-to-face with my class advisor, Gotou Ryuuzen.

“Alright, time to talk about your post-graduation plans.”

It was the middle of December, and each third-year student was scheduled to meet one-on-one with their class advisor to discuss their future. You see, I didn’t go to the clubroom just to “laze around” — I was killing time until my meeting.

Typically these meetings were spent discussing grades, mock test scores, and reviewing aptitude for the student’s chosen college, but...

“Then again, in your case, there’s really not much to talk about! No hard work required on my part, that’s for sure. You’ve already got it all settled! Remember, Yamaboshi’s recommending you, so work hard and make us proud. That’s that!”

Gossan flipped through my file, then closed it.

"But I guess we should try to make this meeting last the full ten minutes, so let's chat. Okay, uh... Oh yeah, I bought a new rice cooker the other day. It dawned on me that rice is the best part of Japanese cooking. Anything tastes good as long as you nail the rice!"

"Gossan, I..."

"Yeah? What kind of rice cooker do you have at home?"

"...I'm not sure if my college plans are right for me."

"Are you NUTS?! You're the *one* kid who's all set — don't go having doubts on me now! If I have to work overtime, I won't have time to cook my rice! I mean, uh... you already submitted your letter of recommendation!"

It was obvious what he was *really* worried about.

"You can't take it back now, y'know. Well... you *could* change things if you really wanted to, but depending on the circumstances..."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to create more work on your end, I promise."

I didn't want Yamaboshi to look bad for recommending me.

"Honestly, this is probably just one of those teenager things. I know I've still got options, but now that I'm going to a university of education, it'll be harder to change my career later on. It just feels like I'm setting my *whole life* in stone..."

I had made my bed, and I was planning to lie in it... but I was still just a kid.

"I'm scared."

Was I making the right choice? Even if it was what I thought I wanted, I wasn't sure I could trust myself.

"Mmmm... From my perspective, I got the sense you really thought it through, unlike some of these other kids. 'I guess I wanna be a teacher!' Yeah, right, pal."

"You think so?"

"I do. Now run along home and eat your dinner."

"...Okay then..."

"Wait a minute! Relax, I'm joking. C'mon, don't gimme that face." Gossan scratched his head. "I don't want you running to the principal and telling him you wanna change your plans all because your class advisor didn't take you seriously."

"I wouldn't do that. I'm not going to change my plans."

"I gotta say, there aren't many like you. You're the type who could survive on your own, even outside of Japan."

"You really think I'm that strong?"

"I mean, at some point in your life you're gonna need a partner who can support you. But I think you'd be fine for a few years."

Hmm. Can't really argue with that.

"Lately I've just been feeling really conflicted, that's all. I'm kinda depressed... Okay, not *depressed*, but I've been thinking..."

"Aha. Now I get it."

Huh? A spark of hope rose up inside me. While at first glance Gossan seemed like a total slacker, in reality, he had keen powers of observation. Surely he must have found the answer I was looking for.

"You're just bored."

"Okay, that's it, I'm leaving."

"Wait, wait, wait! Seriously, don't go! And that smile is starting to scare me!"

My angry "smile" was one of my secret weapons.

"Basically, what I'm saying is, I think you're overthinking things. What you need is to take action. Now, I've heard the local elementary school is looking for volunteers..."



How long had it been since I last visited an elementary school? Years, easily. And I'd never even been to this one.

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. *Wait, but what if they see me breathing heavily and think I'm some pedo*

creep?! God, I'm so nervous!

As my excitement and dread mingled, I followed the path to the school building, just as instructed.

"Hello there! Nagase Iori-san, I presume?"

"Uh, y-yeah!"

This friendly-looking middle-aged man must have taken one look at my uniform and guessed who I was.

During the meeting, Gossan had suggested I take part in the after-school daycare program hosted by the local elementary school. It was entirely unpaid volunteer work, but Yamaboshi students were more than welcome, since the two schools were on friendly terms.

So Gossan put in a good word for me, and the next day they wrote back, inviting me over three days later on the following Monday. And now here I was, about to become a daycare teacher for the first time.

"I was a teacher for many, many years, but then I retired, and now this is what I do in my spare time. And there are a handful of other instructors on staff as well."

The man's name was Kosugi, and he used to be an elementary school teacher. As we walked, he spoke to me with the gentle affection of a grandfather.

After-school daycare was a program that gave kids somewhere to go when classes were over if their moms and dads were still at work. Technically there was no age limit, but older kids generally either went home on their own or hung out with their friends instead, so the vast majority of daycare attendees were between the ages of five and eight.

"On the weekdays we get about forty or fifty kids per day, supervised by two or three instructors, myself included. There's a lady who works here part-time... Oh, and a young college student as well."

"Am I going to be an instructor, too?"

"Technically speaking, yes. But the kids call us Sensei, just like any other teacher."

The word *sensei* tickled my ears... *Wait, where are we*

walking to, anyway?

"So, uh, you told me to come wearing sweatpants, and now I'm guessing we're already on our way to the classroom, but... what exactly am I supposed to do when we get there...?"

"You'll be fine. Oh, and I know it's cold, but you'll want to take off that coat."

"Oh, okay... Wait, but that doesn't answer my question!"

"You want to know what you should be doing? Ask the children."

Then Kosugi opened the classroom door.

"Listen up, everyone! That nice older girl I told you about is here to see you!"

"YAAAAAAAAAY!"

"Let's play soccer!"

"Now!"

"Come on!"

A crowd of boys ran up — one, two, three, four —

"W-Wait! If you're gonna drag me, at least drag me *forward*! I'm gonna fall!"

At first I was overwhelmed by the kids' enthusiasm, but as I quickly learned, all I really needed to do was hang out with them until their parents showed up later that evening. From there, it was a piece of cake.

We all gathered out on the playground — me, plus a group of twelve second- and third-grade boys.

"Our team will have seven, and your team will have six. Nagase-sensei is a high schooler, so she counts as two people."

"Nuh-uh! She's a girl!"

"Whoa there, fellas. It seems you're underestimating me quite a bit. You know I've mastered the Marseille turn, right? I could count as *three* people, easy."

"I don't know what that is, but you're going down, punk!"

"HEY! Don't call me that! *Now* who's the punk?!"

“Let’s just play already! If it turns out Sensei’s no good, we can add a handicap later!”

What a bunch of brats!

And so it was decided that my team would only have six players. At the kickoff, I noticed we weren’t using a standard soccer ball, but something softer.

“Pass! Pass!” I waved my hand.

“Be a team player and wait your turn!” said a kid on the other team.

“I just wanted to show everybody what I can do, that’s all! ...Thanks for the pass!”

As the ball rolled to my feet, I stopped it under my foot, then got a running start. They had no expectations of me yet, so there was no pressure. That made this easy.

“Hiiii-YAAAAAH!”

So I kicked the ball as hard as I possibly could. Since the game had only just started, most players were still in the center of the playing area, and my torpedo attack shot right through them. In an instant, it crossed the half-sized field all the way to the goal.

The goalie must have been terrified when he saw that ball rocketing towards him. He let out a shriek and punched it away with his fist. Then I closed in.

When I originally kicked the ball, I was already at full speed. Not only did I have an overall physical advantage, including a height gap of more than 30 centimeters, but I’d caught him off-guard, too. He didn’t stand a chance.

So I ran all the way across the field and kicked the rebound back into the goal before the goalie could take another step!

“GOOOOOAL!”

I thrust both fists into the air in a victory pose. I had completely dominated the other team. It felt like I had superpowers!

I turned back to the center of the field. “Hey guys! Come and celebrate with me!”

"I can't believe it! She's so immature!"

I had frightened every single one of them, including my own team.

Aww, c'mon! I'm mature, I swear! Good grief... I'm a kid, too, y'know!

After that, I took the hint and started going easy on them. Not *too* easy, mind you, lest my team get mad at me, but I gave myself some ground rules, such as: *no kicking the ball over the grade-schoolers' heads*. And in the end, we won 6-3. (Naturally, it was my hat-trick that sealed the deal.)

Once the soccer match was over, it was time for everybody to get a start on their homework. The classroom had a carpeted floor; some students sat at desks, while others gathered around long tables. Though, there wasn't enough room for everybody, so the kids took turns in shifts.

Last time I was with a group of boys, but this time I drew in a crowd of first-, second-, and third-grade girls. Evidently they were curious about this mysterious older girl.

"Nagase-sensei, will you teach me?"

"Sure, let's see... Oh, a system of linear equations. Alrighty then... Penne with eggplant, mozzarella, and tomato sauce for 900 yen, bacon-spinach carbonara for 1000 yen... Uh, wow. Very specific. Someone was hungry when they made this worksheet."

"What about mine?"

"Sure, what're you working on? *There is a sphere located within a three-dimensional object. If its radius is... blah blah blah... then what is the length of the...* Wait a minute, this is HARD! Was I ever taught this?!"

Dang, kids are smart these days!

"Will you help me write my ABCs?"

"All you have to do is trace over the outline, so you don't really need my—"

"Can you write my book report for me?"

"The whole thing?!"

“Play with me!”

“We’ll have playtime later... Hey, don’t climb up my body!”

I was now completely surrounded by grade-schoolers... with no escape...

“C’mon, ladies, don’t bully the nice older girl. Let’s all get back to our homework.”

“Boooo! You’re a meanie, Kazama-sensei!”

“Yep, I’m the biggest meanie ever. Now let’s see you knock out that homework.”

Kazama, the college-age instructor, turned the kids back to their work and even put their pencils in their hands. Reluctantly, they all conceded.

“Th-Thank you,” I said to him as we stood a short distance away, watching over the little ones.

“Any half-decent senpai would’ve done the same, *Sensei*,” he replied.

Judging from his carefully styled hair, he looked like a flashy, superficial guy, but I could tell he was actually pretty considerate of others.

“Interested in being a teacher, are you? Can’t imagine you’d volunteer for this otherwise.”

Everyone was allowed to talk during homework time, which meant I was free to chat for a bit, too.

“Yes, sir. I’m planning to major in education. What about you, Kazama-san?”

“Call me ‘Kazama-sensei’ when we’re with the kids. But to answer your question, yeah. Otherwise I’d find a job that actually pays what it’s worth.”

“So the pay isn’t great, I take it.”

“Absolutely not. And it doesn’t get better for full-time teachers, either. Considering the long hours and all the responsibilities, only someone who’s passionate about the field would choose this... Actually, I shouldn’t be telling you this. Don’t wanna crush your dreams.” He chuckled to himself. “You’re in your last year of high school, right? You

sure you wanna be spending your time here instead of studying for entrance exams? I could tutor you, if you want.”

“Oh, I already got into my dream college. Letter of recommendation.”

“Ah, I see now. So you’ve got some free time on your hands. Well, why don’t we hang out sometime? I’ll invite *my* friends, you can invite *your* friends...”

“Uhh... The number you have dialed is not in service at this time.”

“Hahaha! You’re hilarious.”

Yep, he seemed like a pretty vapid guy. I never imagined someone like him would want to be a teacher, too.

“Kazama-sa— I mean, Kazama-sensei, what made you want to be a teacher?”

“Well, this way I’ll never have to worry about office politics. And as long as I do a decent job, I’ll never get sacked.”

“What?”

“Just kidding. I used to be a delinquent, but then my class advisor reached out to me and turned my life around.”

“Oh...”

“Just kidding. What kind of answer were you looking for, Nagase-sensei?”

“Nothing specific. I just sincerely wanted to know, that’s all.”

“Well, if we ever hang out, I guess maybe I’ll tell you. Anyway, I’ll look after things over here, so you go watch the kids playing.”

Apparently he didn’t feel like just giving the answer away. *What a meanie*. But as I watched him from behind, I could tell that there was some deeper meaning to it, and... he really did seem like a teacher. Almost like he was rubbing my own immaturity in my face. It was frustrating, to say the least.

“Sensei, let’s play!” one of the girls called. She and four other girls were sitting in a circle, setting up some kind of

board game, and there was room for one more player.

So I set my conflicted feelings aside, rolled up my sleeves, and joined in.

“Sure thing! I don’t know if I can stay for the whole game, though. Is it okay if I drop out partway through?”

I hadn’t played board games with a huge group in a really long time, and I was excited — but at the same time, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a little girl in pigtail braids, sitting cross-legged against the wall. For a second I thought she was just zoning out, but then I caught her glancing in our direction. As for the other girls, however, they didn’t seem to notice. Instead, they continued to set up the game.

Using my keen powers of observation, I determined that they didn’t especially dislike her. Thus I rose to my feet, taking care not to make it too obvious what I was up to.

What could I do for these kids in the three measly days I would get to spend with them? What could I leave behind? What were my limits? Was this the right move?

I walked over to the loner girl and crouched down to her eye level.

“Wanna play with us?”



“Sugar... Need sugar... Give me sugar, or give me death...”

As a result of Yukina’s endless whining, after we finished our lunch we all headed to the cafeteria.

“You’re gonna gain weight, you know,” Misaki teased.

“It... It’s fine! Extra padding for the winter! Everybody gains weight during entrance exam hell!”

“Uggggghhhh... Nnnngggghhhh... Yeah, that’s all it is... Yeah... I’ll lose the weight after exams are over...”

“Guys, you’re breaking Yui’s brain!” I shouted, grabbing Yui and shaking her by the shoulders.

“If anything, it’s weirder that you haven’t gained a pound since we retired from track,” Yukina told Misaki. “Not like

you've changed your diet, right?"

"I have a really high metabolism," Misaki replied casually.

"Agh, I knew it! Dang it, I've been doing portion control and everything! Wait... Yui, what's wrong?"

"If anything, I've been eating *more*... but I can't tell them that... No, I must have just imagined it," Yui murmured to herself in a trance.

I don't think I like where this conversation is headed!

"Guys, let's talk about something else. Don't forget, Yui gave up counting calories to do calculus instead."

"Counting calories...?! Oh god... I wanna die...!"

"Don't kill her, lori!"

Uh oh! Yui's staring into space like she's a zombie!

"Well, if it isn't my four favorite girls!"

Right as we arrived at the cafeteria, we bumped into Nakayama.

"What brings you to the caf? Oh yeah, lori! I heard you're volunteering at an after-school daycare program! That's amazing!" she gushed, eyes sparkling. I didn't bother hiding it from my classmates since I figured word would get around, but I was surprised that she'd already heard about it.

"Yeah, it really is," Misaki nodded.

"Nah, not really. I'm just playing with little kids," I replied.

"Even still! I'm impressed you'd go out of your way to volunteer yourself. If it was me, I totally couldn't do it unless someone else volunteered with me... like Misaki!" Yukina pounced on her bestie.

"Yeah, you definitely couldn't handle it..."

"...Wow, that was kinda harsh..."

"Grade-schoolers, huh? I bet they're so smol... I wanna volunteer, too... Heehee..."

"You should! Oh, wait... I guess everyone else is kinda busy right now, huh? And then there's me, the slacker."

Did it sound a little self-deprecating? Sure, I admit it.

"You're not a slacker! You're working hard to follow your dreams!" Nakayama shouted, flailing her arms and her

pigtails, her gaze firm and bright. "You're an inspiration, seriously!"

My only option was to accept it.

"...Thanks, Nakayama-chan."

"Why do you sound so dead serious? Where's your jokey comeback?" Yukina teased. "For real, Iori, you're, like, a total beacon of hope. I'm gonna work hard to get into my dream school, just you wait!"

"You've really set the bar for all of us," Misaki murmured pensively.

"I gotta catch up to her... I gotta start counting calories so I can at *least* have the same body type...!"

"Yui, you realize that's, like, biologically impossible, right? You're never going to be the same height. Or the same cup size, for that matter."

"I... I can't believe you, Yukina! Fine, forget it! I'm gonna buy ice cream and eat it, right in the middle of winter! As if I care!"

Yui stormed off to the school store; Yukina and Misaki followed after her.

"Let's catch up next time we grab lunch together, okay?" And with that, Nakayama walked off.

But as for me, I was rooted to the spot. The winter sky was a blanket of low-hanging clouds. Then I heard the *clank* of a can falling to the bottom of the vending machine.

"You don't have to live up to their expectations, you know."

The voice was hard like aluminum, but warm like coffee. Inaba Himeko looked over her shoulder at me as she stood at the vending machine, drink in hand. Apparently she'd been listening to our conversation.

"Yeah, I know."

Maybe she thought I believed otherwise. Knowing her, she didn't want me to feel obligated to fit within their parameters.

"Thank you, though."

She gazed back at me, fidgeting with the can of coffee in her hands. "I noticed you've been kinda down lately."

What? It wasn't like we saw each other every day. When did she notice?

"You think so? Well... yeah, I guess."

Finally, I found it in me to simply admit it. She was my best friend, and I didn't need to front around her.

"Getting cold feet about your career choice?"

"I mean... I didn't *think* I was, but..."

I wasn't lying to her, either. That was certainly part of it, but the real root cause felt like something different. Something harder to explain. And since I couldn't explain it, I had no way of finding a solution for it.

"...High school's almost over, huh?" I murmured hesitantly.

"Sure is. These past three years have been downright insane... «Heartseed» nonsense included."

Quietly, she named the entity that was an integral part of our high school lives. It felt like I hadn't heard any of us mention it in a long, long time... Now that everything had gone back to normal, we didn't really stop to think about it anymore.

"Yeahhhh, that was... Honestly, it's a miracle we managed to keep going to school."

"For sure."

"And we'll probably be talking about it for years to come."

Though it was the middle of lunch period, no one wanted to use the vending machine that was outside in the cold. This afforded us some privacy.

Inaban casually ran a hand through her hair — a mature, seductive gesture.

At seventeen, we were caught in the purgatory between child and adult. We could fit in either box or vacillate between the two, depending on whatever suited us.

"Do you have regrets?"

"What kind of regrets?"

"I don't know. Maybe you... wish you could've dated Taichi?"

It was a surprisingly bold question, but I wasn't offended. After all, there was indeed a time when the three of us were in a love triangle.

"What, so you think the reason I never dated anyone is because I'm still hung up on Taichi?"

"Not exactly. I don't picture you as the type who has trouble moving on."

"And you'd be right, because I *have* moved on. Not to sound like a total sore loser, but... when I think about whether he would've been the right guy for me, the answer is probably no."

"Hmph. Relax. He may be perfect to me, but even I can see that he's not *objectively* perfect."

He's perfect to you? Whoa. Maybe that's just how it feels when you're sincerely in love with someone...? Hmm... Can't really picture it.

"Alrighty then! Now that I know you and Taichi are still crazy about each other, I think it's safe to say I have no regrets!"

"Good. Glad to hear it."

"But still... I'm glad we talked about it, Inaban."

"Me, too."

After final period, I headed off to the elementary school, just like yesterday. But since I had an errand to run beforehand, I was running a little late. Fortunately they didn't hold me to a strict schedule since I still had classes to attend, but by the time I arrived, the kids would already be there, waiting for me.

As I was on my way to the front gates, I spotted two familiar figures in the middle of a conversation. *What's going on, folks?*

"Sorry I gotta leave you behind, Maiko."

"Oh, that's alright, Shingo. I have my own business to

take care of.”

“Are you sure you should be out here?”

“Let me say goodbye, at the very least. I *am* your girlfriend, after all.”

“Yeah, of course. I gotta say, I’m impressed at how hard you’re working to help people at a time like this. I could never do what you do.”

“Indeed you couldn’t. After all, this is my *sworn duty*!”

She even struck a cool pose. *Good grief.*

He walked away, looking longingly over his shoulder at her as he went. Meanwhile, she waved energetically until he had disappeared from sight.

“...So what was *that* about, Fujishima-san?”

“Oh, hello, Nagase-san.”

As she turned back to the school building, she spotted me and stopped short. It was Fujishima Maiko, former queen of the Student Council Outreach Committee, current queen of Yamaboshi’s class presidents. Following an impassioned confession, she was currently dating one Watase Shingo.

“Normally we walk to cram school and study together until classes start, but recently I received a new mission.”

“Since when do you receive missions?”

“Haven’t I always?”

“Touché.”

She was so persuasive, she could make anything sound like plain fact.

“Sounds like you two haven’t let your romance get in the way of your studies, then.”

Everything about them was so dramatic, I couldn’t picture them having a normal relationship, but in actuality, things seemed to be working out between them.

“Our love may be deep, but we always keep our heads above water. That’s our philosophy.”

“Are you *sure* you’re my age?”

“So tell me, Nagase-san. I hear you’re working hard and pursuing your dreams while the rest of us are still struggling

to secure a one-way ticket to college.”

“Nothing as fancy as you make it sound. What about you? You’re aiming for law school, right?”

“That’s right. I intend to protect the systems that keep society in order while making use of those same legal loopholes to defend the weak. And from there, I’d like to look into legislation that can change the whole world.”

“That’s incredible, Fujishima-san. You have my undying support, 100 percent.”

Dang, she’s so badass!

“As for Shingo, he declared his intent to attend the same school as me, but of course he didn’t have the grades for it, so then he settled for K University, but even that was presumptuous, so now he’s trying to talk me into going to R University with him. He said he doesn’t even care what he majors in. Can you believe it? He’s the direct result of a culture that values test scores above all else.”

“You don’t pull any punches, huh?”

Spoken like a true lawyer in the making. She scrutinized everything with an objective eye, even her own boyfriend.

“So, I hear you’ve been feeling a bit gloomy lately.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that...?” I muttered, shrugging my shoulders.

“Well, I imagine it’s because you stand out more than you realize.”

That, and a lot of you are super observant.

“But in my case, I can smell it in the air.”

“Smell?! What smell?!”

She sniffed, flaring her nostrils. “I’m detecting a mixture of many things, but among them, I’d say romance is the strongest.”

What are you, a dog?!

“I had thought you regretted missing your chance to date Yaegashi-kun, but in fact, perhaps what you truly regret is missing your chance to date Inaba-san.”

“Okay, you lost me.”

Never mind — she's delusional. Why would I regret not dating Inaban?! She's a girl! Aagh! Okay, calm down and think about it!

"I admit, ever since Inaban and Taichi got together, I don't get to spend much time with them one-on-one anymore."

As the words left my lips, I found myself surprised to discover I felt this way. I was happy that they got together, but I was a little sad, too.

My high school career was fun and magical, but it was by no means perfect.

"Now that graduation is just around the corner, it makes perfect sense for us to stop and reflect on the past three years," Fujishima nodded intently, like she could personally relate. "And in times such as these..."

Just then, the sentimental mood in the air completely evaporated.

"We should throw a party! Yes, let's have a Christmas party — and you'll be the host! I'll find out who's interested, then speak with the school and arrange to rent out one of the multipurpose classrooms. You can do the rest of the planning!"

"Wait, but I never said—!"

"Think of it as practice for when you're a schoolteacher, arranging events for your students."

"That's, like, *four years from now!*"

"Oh, but these sorts of co-ed events will be very common during college, especially among the popular clique, which is where I imagine you'll wind up. In fact, perhaps you could start a club like the CRC, where the whole point is just to sit around and—"

"Hey! Be nice!"



The next day, Wednesday, the third-years were abuzz with excitement:

“Christmas parties are for cool kids! Does... Does that make us cool kids?!”

“It’s our last chance to be happy before the final stretch of exam prep...”

“Is there gonna be cake? I can’t wait!”

“I heard we’re allowed to bring whatever we want. Is that true?”

“Man, I appreciate Fujishima-san and Katori putting this party together! Not to mention the VIP, Nagase, of course!”

For Pete’s sake, slow down!

Somehow they’d already decided to have the party on the 24th, the day of the second semester closing ceremony. Third-years only, attendance optional. Judging from the speed with which Fujishima got permission from the teachers, I could only assume she had some serious dirt on them. But the bigger problem was this: Everyone had already decided I was the main host.

“Thank you, Iori! I appreciate you taking up the mantle since you don’t have exams.”

“But I never agreed to—”

“Not only is she the most beautiful girl in school, but she’s our student representative, too! She’s totally different from the rest of us!”

“No, I—”

“Nagase-san! Thank you for putting together a Christmas party! We’ve never had much hope of being popular, but with your help, we see the light at the end of the tunnel!”

Fine! I’ll do it, okay?! Sheesh!

If possible, I wanted this to be a fun event that would give these busy little beavers a brief reprieve from studying and motivate them to keep trying. But they were too busy to help set things up... and if the event ran too long, it would clash with cram school and/or their other plans...

I thought back to the Couples’ Battle Royale from earlier this spring. Maybe this event wouldn’t be as exciting as that one, but I could probably get pretty close. I just needed

some kind of entertainment... but what? Music and dancing? Would they enjoy that?

"Iori-chaaaaan! Whatcha worried about? Did you struggle with that last math quiz? Don't worry — I didn't understand a single thing, easy," said Aoki as he walked over to my desk.

"What? No. That quiz was super basic."

"...Wait, for reals?!"

"Just stop talking to me. You're gonna add more worries to my plate."

"*More* worries? So you admit you're struggling with something."

If I told him about it, would he feel obligated to help me? I wanted him to focus on his studies — for Yui's sake as much as his own. But I got the feeling he'd only get even more annoying if I tried to clam up.

"...I'm not sure what to do for the party."

"Anything's cool!" he replied — so fast, I couldn't help but stare at him in disbelief.

"I mean, I'm sure they'd be happy with whatever I serve up, but some parties are more fun than others, right?"

"I dunno about that. I feel like it'll be fun no matter what."

He could afford to be that flippant about it since he didn't have to make the big decisions... but then again, he was just a party guest. All I needed him to do was show up.

"Okay, thanks for the help," I said without really meaning it, then stood up. I needed a break from the classroom.

Then, out in the hallway, I bumped into Taichi.

"Oh, hey, Nagase."

"Well, if it isn't Taichi!"

"I see you're throwing together another spontaneous event."

"It wasn't *my* idea, though. It was all Fujishima-san."

"Oh, I see. Yeah, that makes sense. First the Couples' Battle Royale, and now this..."

He seemed strangely sympathetic.

"I take it you can relate, huh? It's been like, one day, and suddenly *everyone's* talking about it! And the closing ceremony is next Friday, and I gotta go to daycare today, and then I gotta write my report about it..."

I was already kind of busy as things stood, but now I felt like I was *really* busy all of a sudden, all because other people took it upon themselves to try and help me with my worries. *How hard am I supposed to work at this stuff, exactly? You guys know I'm still studying in my free time, right?*

I wasn't trying to whine, but with Taichi, I found myself opening up about my struggles. Nevertheless, he was happy to let me vent until I was satisfied. Being around him was comfortable — probably one of the bigger reasons I enjoyed our friendship. If I needed a shoulder to lean on, he would be there.

But if our relationship had gotten any deeper, it would have broken down sooner or later. Maybe after we were a little more mature... Or heck, maybe if we'd dated, we would have worked through it together. Over the past three years, that possibility was always there.

"But seriously though, what should I do about the party? What kind of party should it be?"

"Hmmm."

He folded his arms in contemplation — *that's my Taichi!*

"Eh, I'm sure whatever you want to do will be just fine."

My legs gave out in utter defeat.

Today was my last day of daycare. These three days had gone by in a flash.

"Hi there, everybody!"

"Hi, Sensei!" the class chorused back. They had warmed up to me considerably over the last two days, and this one aspect made me kinda want to be an elementary school teacher.

"Nagase-sensei! Let's play soccer! And this time, you're

going down!”

“Sensei! You promised we’d finish our game today!”

“Nagase-sensei, weren’t you going to help me with my homework?”

“Okay, yeah, sure... Dang it, kids, I’m a babysitter, not a miracle worker!”

“...What’s wrong, Nagase-sensei?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing. I’ve just always wanted to say that.”

If today’s my last day, then I’m going out with a bang!

During the soccer game, I unleashed my promised Marseille turn (which I had been practicing at home, but they didn’t need to know that) and won the game for my team.

“Rrgh! One more game! One more game!”

“I told you this was gonna be the last one. Maybe after you finish your homework, I’ll think about playing some more.”

Among the kids who chose to play inside the classroom, old-school classics like ball-and-cup and cat’s cradle were all the rage. According to the other instructors, it was merely a phase that would swiftly be replaced by the next hot fad.

“Oh... Oh?! I DID IT! Fish in a Dish!”

“Whoaaaaa!”

“Cool!”

“That’s amazing!”

And during study time, I helped out with homework. Looking at these problems from a grade-school point of view — without the help of any advanced formulas — was by no means easy, but after a few tries, I got the hang of it.

“So then you take that and put it there, and then you just count! Man, it’s so much easier when there’s an X involved... Whoever invented math was a genius.”

That winter afternoon, I was filled with awe at the importance of education.

“X? Like ‘Ultimate X Cannon’?! ”

“Huh? Is that from an anime or something? Anyway, no.

No cannons this time.”

I wanted the chance to talk to as many kids as possible, so I bounced from group to group.

“You’re a busy little bee, Nagase-sensei,” said Kazama, the college student.

“Oh, I’m just making the most of my time here while I’ve got it.”

“Don’t you think you’re trying a little too hard?”

“Maybe, but... I mean, today’s my last day.”

Beneath his joking tone, I could sense something more serious. Something... probing.

“No wonder you’re rushing around. Look, you’re not gonna miss out on anything, alright? You can come back anytime you want.”

“But it’s winter break, and after this next semester, I’ll be graduating.”

I had so much I wanted to do, and so little time left.

“Maybe once you’re in college, you could work here part-time? Unless there’s something else you’d rather be doing, like making money. If you want money, don’t work here.”

He *did* have a point... but...

“I’ll think about it.”

Even I could tell I didn’t sound convincing.

It was such a minor thing — was I screwing it up somehow? I was trying to get rid of this discomfort in my chest, so I asked someone for advice, and the next thing I knew, here I was, playing with little kids. Not only that, there was now a party scheduled for the 24th and I was the host. But I had pledged to try my best at it nonetheless.

From an objective point of view, I probably seemed like I had the perfect life. But something was missing. My heart felt empty... felt *hungry*. Why did I feel this way?

Just then, one of the girls toddled away from her group and right up to me.

“Nagase-sensei, what’s wrong?”

It was the wallflower girl from my first day. Ever since I

helped her break the ice that first time, she had learned how to join social groups on her own.

"Don't you wanna play with your friends? Why'd you walk away?" I asked.

"...Cuz you looked lonely."

"O-Oh."

I must've let it show on my face. Instantly, I cursed myself. I was supposed to be looking after *them*, not the other way around. At this rate, I would never be a real teacher.

"Did something bad happen?"

She was a very observant girl. For better or for worse, she reminded me of myself.

She looked up at me with innocent eyes untainted by darkness. She was pure white; the adults in her life would determine what colors she took on. And while I felt I could be a force for good, at the same time, it frightened me. What if I dyed her in the wrong color — permanently?

"What's wrong?"

I decided to talk to her about it.

"Well, um, I have a question: If you were going to throw a party, what kind of stuff would you want to do?"

"A party?"

"Say, for example, it was a big party with everybody here. What would be the funnest thing you could think of?"

She fell silent for a moment, thinking as hard as she could.

"...Anything."

"Anything, huh?"

It wasn't a bad answer, per se. But for her sake, I wanted to be clear.

"Listen... I think that's a perfectly good answer, but if there's something you really want, it's okay to say it flat-out. Nobody can read your mind, y'know?"

But this only seemed to hurt her. And when I saw her little face twist in misery, I realized: *Oh. She's probably heard*

that same thing from dozens of people by now.

If I didn't even have the tact to interact with a kid more than ten years my junior, then I had no business being a teacher.

But the little girl remained persistent.

"Anything would be fun! I mean it!"

She was desperate to get me to understand.

I'd thought she was weak, but that was only ever an assumption on my part. No, she was strong — and maybe even more mature than I was, the way things were looking. But as the grown-up in charge, I couldn't acknowledge that. Instead, I looked her in the eye and spoke to her, trying to draw out whatever it was I couldn't yet see.

"Absolutely anything? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Anything."

"Oh, I get it. Because anything can be fun depending on how you look at it, right?"

I tried to pretend I had it all figured out, but she gave me a funny look.

"Um... it's fun because your friends are there."

It's fun because your friends are there... Because your friends are there... Friends...

Wait... Maybe that's why I've been feeling this way...

This was the entirety of what she meant; there was no deeper meaning to it. But she didn't have the words to explain that, hence "anything's fun." She had taught me something new.

Now I get it. Being a teacher wasn't just about teaching the kids — there were plenty of things that the kids could teach the teacher, too. Even within three measly days.

"Thank you. Really."

I reached out and stroked her hair. She beamed at me happily.

"Oh, and... I'm sorry for what I said."

"That's okay."

Just like that, she was willing to forgive me.

At last, my time was up, and my daycare volunteer period was over. Some of the kids were still around, but the older gentleman, Kosugi, waved me over and led me to another room to explain how to write the postmortem report.

“...So anyway, that’s the basic format we look for. I know you’re probably busy, but you don’t have to put too much detail into it.”

After this, I was officially done.

“Any final questions?”

“Umm, let me think...”

There *was* something I wanted to ask someone who had spent their whole life as a teacher.

“What made you decide to be a teacher?”

I gazed at his face, wrinkled and worn from all his years of experience. His eyes were beautiful — I could only imagine all the things he must have seen in his lifetime.

“Because that’s what I wanted to be.”

“Well, what motivated you to keep...” I started to ask, then stopped myself.

If I asked, he would probably give me a halfway decent answer about the *fun and joy and struggle and pain and hardship* of being a teacher. But that wasn’t the answer I was looking for. As it turned out, three days was just enough time for me to put it all together.

“So tell me, Nagase-san, why is it *you* want to be a teacher?” Kosugi asked in turn.

I scanned through all the words in my vocabulary, seeking to put together an answer. But in the end, I repeated the same phrase lodged deep inside my heart.

“I want to be a lighthouse for all those lost at sea.”

Part of me worried that this veteran teacher would think I sounded naive, but I didn’t regret saying it.

“That’s a wonderful dream,” Kosugi replied, accepting my naivete with grace. “But in that case, becoming a teacher is but one of many methods you could use to realize that

goal.”

Indeed, it was always just an option. Anything would work, as long as it got me where I wanted to go.

“It’s admirable to want to be a teacher... At least, that’s what I ought to say to you, considering the circumstances,” Kosugi grinned. “But Nagase-san, I encourage you to think about exactly what it is you want, then spend your life chasing after it. Because for you, I imagine the possibilities are truly endless.”

All this time, I’d only ever pictured one path: *go to college, get good grades, take the Japanese Teaching Staff Examination, and become a teacher*. But that was just one route I could take — just an *example*, really. I could get there however I wanted and my experience would be unique, even compared to those who took the exact same route as me. Life was full of twists and turns like that.

I wanted to have the eyes to see both the forest and the trees. I wanted to help kids — wanted to remember what it felt like to be one. Right now, I felt that being a teacher was the closest to what I wanted. But if I stumbled across a better path along the way, so be it. Life was flexible and full of possibilities.

“...Thank you for making time for me and welcoming me to your school. It really meant a lot.”

I bowed deeply as I expressed my gratitude.

“I hope this experience helped you, even just a little. Now then, I’ll walk you to the gate.”

“Thanks.”

I wasn’t ready for it to end. I didn’t even get to say goodbye to the kids.

As we stepped outside, I discovered that the shy winter sun had already sunk beneath the horizon. And also, it was cold as heck.

“Let’s go this way.”

Kosugi led the way, and I followed.

“Wait, but... wouldn’t the other way be faster?”

“Nah. See?”

I looked in the direction he pointed.

In the distance, through the first-floor windows, I could see a group of children gathered in the hallway. Each of them held up a piece of construction paper, each with a messy letter scrawled onto it, forming a makeshift banner:

THANK YOU NAGASE SENSEI

“Thank you, Nagase-sensei!”

“Bye-bye!”

“Come back soon!”

“I wanna play more soccer!”

“See you someday!”

Sure, some of the kids had already gone home for the day, but those who remained were smiling and waving goodbye. Some of them were jumping up and down... and a few were even doing chest bumps with each other for some reason.

My field of vision blurred. How had I helped these kids? Honestly, our time together was too short for me to have left any lasting impact. Over time, most of them would probably forget all about me. If anything, they helped *me*.

I would never forget this warmth in my chest for the rest of my life.

“Wait... I don’t have to stand here at a distance, do I? Can’t I go over there and say goodbye in person?”

“Yeah, of course. I just wanted to set up a touching moment for you.”

The mischievous sparkle in his eye told me all I needed to know.



“Merry Christmas! Man, it’s nice to spend Christmas with the whole gang!” exclaimed Aoki Yoshifumi, wearing a party hat, with his arm around Yaegashi Taichi’s shoulders.

“Technically it’s just Christmas Eve. Actual Christmas is

tomorrow.”

“Seriously, bro, don’t sweat the details! Oh, hey there, lori-chan!”

“Nagase! Thanks for getting all this set up. I know it must’ve been hell.”

“Dude, what did I just say?! Details! Forget ‘em!”

“Uh, Aoki?! Did someone spike your orange juice or what?!”

Naturally, there was no alcohol at this party, so he was probably just drunk off the atmosphere. And he wasn’t the only one.

It was the 24th, and there were just under 300 people in attendance at the Yamaboshi Third-Years’ Christmas Bash. Nearly every third-year was present. I hadn’t expected this many people to show up, and the multipurpose classroom we’d reserved was clearly not enough to accommodate everyone. Thus, we ended up moving the party to one of the rarely-used lecture halls.

The room was a sea of vibrant colors.

“Taichi, we gotta keep drinkin’! Let’s grab some more!”

“Alright, alright! Just get off me already! Seriously, they haven’t spiked the drinks, have they?!”

“Have *funnnn*! But try not to say anything that’ll get us in trouble!”

With that warning, I waved goodbye.

Along the walls we’d set up tables covered in all kinds of drinks (both juice and soda), plus some cookies, little pastries, and even some appetizers like popcorn chicken and cocktail sausages. (There was also a full-sized cake, but the girls demolished it before most people had the chance to even see it.)

The center of the room was packed and buzzing with conversation, their voices mingling together to create a chaotic din. Laughter reverberated off the walls, and I could hear people clapping. It was so warm in here, you’d never know it was winter outside. Honestly, I half-expected some of

these people to start dancing.

But oddly enough, I could feel a sense of unity throughout the whole room. Even though I was walking by myself, I didn't feel alone. I was just happy to be near them.

As I weaved my way through the crowd, I scanned the room and spotted Nakayama Mariko snacking with her boyfriend, Ishikawa Daiki.

"Here, Nakayama, eat this."

"Thanks, Ishikawa-kun. But this piece of chicken is a little too big for me..."

"Oh, quit trying to pretend you have table manners, Nakayama! I've seen the way you horf down cafeteria food!" Watase Shingo teased.

"Cram it, Watase-kun!"

"Sorry about that. In that case, how about this cocktail sausage?"

"S-Sausage?! W-Well... um..."

"You don't like sausage?"

"N-No, it's not that! If anything, I *love* sausage... but... well...!"

"Hahaha, your mind's totally in the gutter! Nakayama's a closet pervert!"

"W-Watase-kun, if you don't shut your mouth, I'm gonna beat you to death with my pigtails!"

"Oh god, please, no! Anything but that!"

Ever since he started dating Fujishima, Watase had gotten a little full of himself, and the party vibes were only exacerbating the problem.

I could see people peering through the glass door at us. I thought maybe it was some latecomers, but in fact, it was Uwa Chihiro, Enjouji Shino, and a handful of first-years. Apparently the entire Cultural Research Club had come to check out the party.

I tried to wave at them, but they couldn't see me through the crowds of people. Then Chihiro pointed in the direction of the Rec Hall, and off they went. It was the last day of the

semester, so perhaps the CRC was about to have a Christmas party of their own... *Maybe I'll go drop in on them a little later.*

"Now then, it's the final stretch of the Christmas Costume Competition!" a voice rang out over the speaker system.

You see, an informal event was currently being held onstage...

"Guys, c'mon, all eyes over here! I promise, no more crossdressing!"

Apparently the opening gag had turned a lot of people off.

"Look, I swear to you, the rest of the entrants are girls!"

"Finally! Thank you!"

"Now hurry it up!"

"We wanna see!"

Slowly, the students all moved forward to the stage. Caught in the flow of the crowd, I ended up near the front.

"Great party, lori!" said one of my female classmates in passing.

"Wait, so you're not competing?" asked another.

"Not this time, haha... Wouldn't want to steal the show, y'know!"

Just kidding.

"Ugh, you're such a diva!"

"But the worst part is, she's not wrong!"

"Now then, Entry #7: Kurihara Yukina-san! Come on down!"

Yukina sprang out onstage, wearing a sexy Santa costume featuring a sleeveless crop top. "Can't have Christmas without Santa Claus!"

"Oooh, how bold! How daring! Why, she's practically a swimsuit model!"

"I know, right? Check me out!" She struck a playful pose. *I bet she'd do great as a promo girl.*

"Yes! I was waiting for this!"

"She looks so gorgeous!"

"I wanna take a selfie with her!"

Most of the crowd cheered... but not everyone was of the same opinion.

Take, for example, Sone Takuya: "Hmmm... I mean, it's not bad, but..."

Or Miyagami Keisuke: "It's missing something."

"It shows a lot of skin, and not in a good way."

"It's like she doesn't love herself."

"Or like she's used to wearing it for her job or something, so she's not even slightly embarrassed."

"Like a booth babe at a trade show..."

"It's just *missing something*," they chorused together.

"Hey, peanut gallery, *I can hear you!*" Yukina snapped from onstage. The crowd laughed.

"Next, Entry #8: Kiriyama Yui-san!"

The emcee gestured offstage... but no one walked out.

"...Huh? Okay, let me try again. *Kiriyama Yui-san!*"

Like a ferret from its nest, a little round face peeked out from the curtains, then swiftly disappeared. But a few moments later, the shy Santa Claus finally walked onstage, her shoulders hunched like she was trying to hide.

Unlike Yukina, Yui was wearing a long-sleeved top that covered her tummy, but the skirt was still super-short. Her oversized hat threatened to fall over her eyes. It was all so mismatched, it looked like she'd thrown her outfit together at the last minute... and it was totally...

"CUUUUTE!!!" the crowd roared.

"Wh-What are you all screaming about?!" Yui stammered, her face as red as the fabric of her Santa costume.

"Eeeeeee! She's ADORABLE!"

"I wanna take her home wif me!"

"I wanna decorate my room with her!"

The audience was loving it.

"YUIIII! YOU'RE SUPER CUTE!!!" Aoki shouted from the back, louder than anyone else in the room.

"Rrrrgh...!" Yui whimpered, flailing her limbs.

"Yes! That! Exactly!"

"Now *that's* cosplay!"

"Where was this enthusiasm when it was MY turn?!"

Yukina snapped at Sone and Miyagami, and the audience laughed all over again.

"Now, while we're all having a good time, let's bring out Entry #9! It's the girl you'd least expect... Inaba Himeko-san!"

"Ooooooh!" the crowd murmured.

"Seriously? Inaba-san in costume?!"

"Doesn't she hate this kind of thing...?"

"What's gotten into her?"

As the crowd whispered nervously, Inaba walked out, wearing a bright red skin-tight dress with a black belt worn snugly around her waist, emphasizing her slender build. Her attitude was neither enthusiastic nor shy. Instead, she oozed sex appeal, seducing the crowd like a succubus.

"She's really pretty... No, she's *stunning*."

"I mean, yeah, she's beautiful, but..."

"It doesn't really feel like a costume..."

The audience seemed unsure of how they felt about her. Admittedly her outfit felt a little *too* mature for this setting, like a grown-up going trick-or-treating.

"Wh-While we have you, let's ask: What made you decide to enter, Inaba-san?"

"I heard I'd get a free Santa costume out of it, and Taichi's been begging me to wear one."

"Oho! Turns out it's all thanks to Yaegashi-kun's libido! Is she planning to keep wearing it after the show? Not for long, apparently!"

"Himeko! Don't blame it on me! You're the one who asked me if I wanted to see what you looked like in costume!"

But the crowd jeered:

"Pervert!"

"Freak!"

"Degenerate!"

“Lucky bastard!”

“Now then, that’s all of our entrants for today... PSYCH! There’s actually one more surprise entry!”

This was news to me. Who the heck was it?

“Entry #10... our charismatic leader, Fujishima Maiko!”

“OOOOOHHH!” The crowd went wild. After all, Fujishima always liked to goof around, but she really didn’t seem like the type to dress up.

But then someone... or *something*... walked out, covered in brown fur. Her arms, her legs, her body, her head — all of it was fuzzy and brown. Two antlers poked up into the air. Indeed, it was a reindeer onesie.

Fujishima Maiko looked out at the crowd, stone-faced. Then... slowly... she raised her hand in a peace sign.

“...W-Well, there you have it, folks! That’s all the entries for our Christmas Costume Competition! Later tonight you’ll be able to vote for your favorite, so stay tuned!”

A beat later, the audience broke out in a round of applause.

“So, uh... Not to be rude, but... Fujishima-san...”

“She was totally trying to be funny, but... nobody laughed...”

Uh oh. “Shhh! Keep your mouths shut, or she’ll end you!” I warned the two gossipers.

“Okay! Sorry!”

A moment later, someone gently clapped me on the shoulder. “Having fun?”

“Why, good evening, fine sir!”

It was Katori Jouji, wearing a charming smile that was sure to make his fangirls swoon.

“Of course I’m having fun, silly. Who do you think *planned* this shindig?”

I had stuffed this party chock full of my own personal preferences. Was there ever any guarantee that it would pan out? Nope! I just got it all set up, then let the guests figure themselves out from there. After all, anything would be fun

as long as my friends were there.

"As long as you remember to take a break from running things and actually enjoy yourself, that's all that matters."

"Running *what*? Trust me, I'm not even paying attention!"

I had faith that these awesome peeps would behave themselves.

"Uhhhh, that... sounds like a disaster in the making... Well, whatever. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet, but I'm gonna!"

"Good, good. Go have yourself a snack."

What a nice guy. He sent me off with a wave. I'd only had one drink since I got here, so I headed over to the snack tables.

"Hey Shiroyama-kun, look! This is my favorite brand of chocolate chip cookies!"

"Yeah, I know. You pointed them out to me a while back."

"Aww, you remembered... That's so sweet..."

"Of course I'd remember. I could never forget anything about you, Setouchi-san."

Part of me wanted to wait until Setouchi Kaoru and Shiroyama Shouto had finished taking their turn, but at the rate they were moving, we'd be here all night.

"Sorry to interrupt your puppy love, but a girl's gotta eat!"

"Oh, sorry!"

"Sorry, lori!"

The two blushing lovebirds hastily stepped aside, and I got my paws on a muffin. As I took a bite, I turned away from the snack tables... but then I remembered something and spun on my heel. Come to think of it, I was once in a love triangle with *this* happy couple, too. We'd all done some things we regretted, but fortunately we arrived at a peaceful solution.

"Anyway, you two kids have a lovey-dovey time!"

And with that, I walked away.

As I nibbled on my muffin, I contemplated where to go

next. The whole room was full of smiles and laughter... Then I spotted two teachers entering the room: Tanaka-sensei and Hirata-sensei, the happily married couple. (Technically Hirata-sensei wasn't "Hirata" anymore, but for simplicity's sake, we all agreed to keep calling her that.)

"Oooh, looks like we're having a lot of fun in here!" Hirata-sensei grinned. As for Tanaka-sensei, he was wearing his usual scowl... *No, wait.* Upon further examination, his expression seemed a lot softer tonight.

I started to walk over to them, but Oosawa Misaki beat me to it.

"What brings you here, Sensei?"

"We're checking to make sure you people didn't *conveniently* leave any details off of your permission form," said Tanaka-sensei sternly.

"Once we've done our due diligence, we'll be out of your hair, I promise," Hirata-sensei added.

I wasn't worried about them checking on us since I'd known in advance that they'd be dropping by, and plus, we weren't getting up to any funny business.

"Aw, c'mon. You can stay if you want!" Misaki replied amiably.

"No, no. You young people have fun without us."

"You're not that old yourself, Sensei!"

"Yeah... After falling in love, it's like I'm a teenager all over again... Agh, how could you make me admit that?!"

"I'm pretty sure you admitted that of your own free will," Tanaka-sensei retorted wearily.

I had walked over just in case, but evidently Misaki didn't need my help. She had it all covered.

A few more teachers came and visited us after that, but none of them had any complaints about our party. After chatting with the students for a bit, they all swiftly departed, as if to suggest they weren't really all that interested in supervising us.

"I was expecting the teachers to crash our party sooner or

later, but..."

"They sure didn't stick around, huh?"

Relieved, the students quickly went back to partying. So far, so good. Everything was going swimmingly.

"Hey there, Nagase."

As I stood near the door, performing my duty as a party hostess to greet new arrivals and say goodbye to those departing, another teacher called out to me. Then he stuffed the last bite of his muffin into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. It was Gotou Ryuuzen, the class advisor I'd spent the past three years with. Easy to forget he was still in his mid-twenties. Or maybe late twenties at this point.

"I was thinking, you and I haven't talked much since you volunteered at the daycare. I mean, I got the gist of how it went, but yeah."

"I literally wrote a report about my experience, Gossan."

"Yeah, I know. But what I wanna know is if it helped you with your personal problems, remember?"

"You totally told them about it, didn't you?"

No one else was nearby. I leaned up against the wall, scanning the room as I spoke.

"What?"

"When Kosugi-san talked to me, it felt like he knew exactly what I was worried about. Don't get me wrong, he helped shed some light on a lot of things, but it was a little *too* coincidental. Now admit it — what did you tell him?"

"Well, obviously I had to give him an idea of who I was sending. Can't let just anyone be around kids, right?"

"Whoa... Spoken like a real, actual teacher..."

"I *do* have my teaching license, y'know! Anyway, quit trying to read into everything I say. Just say thank you, damn it!"

"I should thank *you* for all the things some other guy said to me?"

"You're welcome! Glad to see you're feeling better."

Times like these, he was kind of infuriating... but to me,

he was still a good teacher. During our time together, he had probably helped me in more ways than I knew. And he wasn't the only one. All of the teachers at Yamaboshi High School had helped me grow from a child to a young adult.

"For a while I wasn't sure, but I think I've made up my mind. I'm going to stay on this track and become a teacher," I told him, partly to reassure him.

"Good, good," he nodded, like a proper teacher. Like an adult.

At some point in his life, through some turn of events, Gossan had arrived at this conclusion, too. And now here he was.

"Listen... All these other kids, they're just focused on trying to get into college at all. But you? You're looking at what lies beyond. So yeah, of course you'd worry! You're getting way too ahead of yourself!"

As he spoke, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Then he remembered he wasn't supposed to smoke in here and promptly put it back in his pocket.

Together, we shared a peaceful moment as the sky darkened. We didn't need to put on airs around each other. We could simply be ourselves, and no matter what happened, it would all fade into the twilight regardless.

"There *is* one other thing I wanted to talk about... not necessarily with you, but just in general," I told him. He didn't respond, so I continued, "Lately I've been feeling kinda emo, and I was trying to figure out why... but now I know the answer."

Was I embarrassed to admit it out loud? Nah, not really.

"I'm sad that I won't get to see my friends anymore."

In the end, that was all it was. I was sad that we were all going our separate ways — sad that high school was ending. This place held so many special memories, and I was sad that I would have to leave it behind.

"Everyone else is still distracted with entrance exams, but before long I bet they'll start getting weepy, too."

I still met up with all my CRC pals on an individual basis, but... how many more chances would we have to hang out in a big group with all five of us together?

Normally I was always so busy with schoolwork, I never paused to think about how sad I was. But whenever there was an idle moment, it would rise to the forefront of my mind, and the loneliness would set in.

I didn't expect Gossan to have an answer for this, but surprisingly, he gave me one regardless.

"It's true you'll all be split up after graduation. You won't be able to see each other every day, or even every week. And it's hard to let go of the people you've spent so much time with."

But we each had our own dreams to pursue.

"But knowing you folks, I'm sure you'll find your way back to each other again. Nothing's stopping you from making plans to meet up."

Nothing's stopping us.

"Don't get me wrong — physically, you'll be far apart. But in your hearts, you'll always have that connection."

Even as we lived our separate lives, we'd carry a bit of each other with us.

"I admit, I spend most of my adult life never thinking about my high school friends. But whenever I meet up with 'em, the memories always come flooding back, whether it's been months or even years."

As he spoke, I could almost see his teenage self come to life.

"For some reason, the dumbest memories are the ones that've stuck with me the longest. Can't tell you how many times I've said the words 'Why do I still remember that?'"

It was like he was back in high school all over again.

"But that's how we keep those old friendships alive. Actually, now that we're all getting older and uglier, we might even be better friends now than we were at the time. Our bodies are old and decrepit, but our hearts haven't

changed since high school.”

As he gazed out at nothing with a smile on his face, I wondered what he was seeing. Whatever it was, it was probably something beautiful.

“Once your hearts are connected, time and distance don’t matter.”

Our hearts could never truly occupy the same space... but bridges could be built between them.

“If you ask me, you’ve made some mighty fine friends here. Both your classmates and your clubmates.”

Definitely.

“And when you’re at college, you’ll make some more.”

Looking back on the days I’d spent thinking I’d *never* make friends, I felt intensely embarrassed for myself. But at the same time, it felt so far away. Back then, I was so sensitive and self-conscious — I thought I was special. But those feelings had faded over time, and now I felt like I’d truly grown up. Still, I wasn’t mad at myself for having an immature phase, and I didn’t feel the need to eradicate those feelings entirely. In the end, it was what formed the foundation of who I was as a person. Sure, I wasn’t special, but I *was* one of a kind.

During my time in high school, I’d met dozens of people, some of whom helped me when I needed it most, and I’d built some incredible friendships. But while it hurt to be apart from them, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that our connection would never fade. Our parting was painful, but it wouldn’t hurt forever.

Besides, I was really looking forward to college. College was going to be bigger and better than high school ever was, and I couldn’t even imagine what great friendships were waiting for me there!

“Now then, folks, sorry for the wait, but it’s time to announce the winner of the Christmas Costume Competition! After that, we’ll be doing a bingo tournament!”

“Welp, I’d say I’ve done my job as a teacher for tonight.

Guess I'll get going. Behave yourselves, alright?"

And so, following the announcement from the stage, Gossan wandered out of the room. But here's what was really aggravating about him: For a moment there, I actually found myself wishing I could be like him someday. Minus the lazy, irresponsible, kinda inappropriate aspects of him, that is.

"One more thing — I'm told Nagase-san is supposed to join me onstage as a guest emcee! Where are you, Nagase-san?"

"Here I am! Coming!"

"What made you want to do a *bingo tournament* of all things, anyway? What are we, 80?"

"Hey! Don't talk smack about bingo!"

The end of the party was fast approaching, but everyone was chatting and laughing louder than ever, as if to stave off the final farewell. From an outsider's perspective, all this racket was probably annoying, but to me, it was sweeter than any music.

My high school career was coming to an end, and my three years with my best buds at Yamaboshi were nearly up. There was still a little time, but I knew the days would fly by in a flash. Next spring was the season of new beginnings, but those beginnings couldn't start unless we ended what we had. Still, just because it was ending didn't mean it was over.

I debated whether I should make my rounds and talk to people as the party started to wind down, but then thought better of it. The room was still so full of laughter and joy. None of us wanted it to end, because once it did, we'd all go right back to studying. Back to the rest of our lives. Back to our dreams.

Take the members of the CRC, for example.

In order to save the Earth, Yaegashi Taichi wanted to study world hunger, the energy crisis, infectious diseases,

genetic diversity, and more, all through the lens of biology. It was a big dream for sure. He seemed to be keeping a pretty level head about it — “No clue if I’ll actually get a job in the field, but I’d like to.” — but as for me, I was sure he’d go on to make the greatest discovery of the century.

Inaba Himeko wanted to study the central core of modern electronics and information technology in order to help develop the latest advancements. “I’ve always wanted to try my hand at creating my own system. Besides, we live in the Information Age, and I’d like to future-proof my career.” (Evidently she was looking at it from both a practical *and* personal standpoint.) Personally, I was just glad she wasn’t planning to abandon her ambitions to be “Taichi’s wifey” or something!

Kiriyama Yui wanted to have a job with worldwide impact. She wanted to travel. “Then after I get married, hopefully I can start teaching foreign languages to kids.” She had a vision of a fulfilling future, and I could easily see it happening for real.

Aoki Yoshifumi had what was perhaps the most childish dream of all: “I wanna run my own company!” But fortunately he’d put a bit more thought into it than your average grade-schooler. “Big or small, I wanna make sure my company can look after its employees and their families.” And I could tell he was serious. He never seemed like the kind of guy who would climb the ranks at someone else’s company, so maybe he was destined to be a leader instead of a follower.

And of course, I was working toward my dreams, too. Along the way, I was sure to meet dozens of new people, some of whom would impact my life forever. I would make connections with people who would go on to connect with more people, and on and on until the whole world was linked. Then, at long last, I would find the one person who could walk this path alongside me.

I never found that special someone during high school,

but I would find them eventually. I was by no means a love expert, but I figured once I met someone who I couldn't possibly live without, I'd finally have my first real relationship. Then we'd jump straight to marriage... *Okay, I know I'm getting ahead of myself, but I feel like it might actually end up happening.*

My life had only just begun. There was still so much more I wanted to do. And the more I thought about my future, the more my heart raced. Going forward, my life would be full of brand-new experiences, the likes of which I couldn't possibly imagine. The possibilities were endless.

Over the past three years, I had learned so much — not just from the people at Yamaboshi, but everyone in my life. There were highs and lows, but in the end, it all helped make me who I was today. I couldn't change the past, and I couldn't know the future, but I could make each moment the very best it could be.

It was my friends who gave me this perspective on life, and right now, there was one thing I wanted to say to them:

Without you, I wouldn't have had such an amazing time at high school, and I can't imagine the rest of my life without you, either.

With all my love and gratitude, from the very bottom of my heart—

"Hey guys! Let's take a group photo!" Katori called across the rowdy room.

"You're a real stand-up guy, Prez! I appreciate that you're willing to be left out of the shot!" Miyagami joked.

"He uses his hot-guy privileges for good instead of evil!" Sone chimed in.

"Now hold on a minute. I never said I wasn't going to be in the shot. Someone else... Gossan, take it for us!"

"Gossan, what are you still doing here? I thought you left!" Misaki remarked. *Yeah, no kidding.*

"Well, I got hungry, and I remembered you had all this extra food here..."

"Then you better make up for the food costs by being our photographer!" Kaoru declared. Apparently she was dead-set on putting him to work.

"Let's both promise neither of us will turn out like Gossan when we grow up, alright? C'mon, Nakayama-chan, let's get in the middle!"

"Right you are, Yukina-chan! We belong in the middle!"

"Okay, everybody ready?"

"W-Wait! Not yet!"

"Maiko, how do you wanna take this picture?"

"Good question. How about I ride you like a horse?"

"Perfect!"

"...Seriously, Watase?"

"Don't judge me, Ishikawa! I'll do anything for love!"

"Yui! Let's stand next to each other!"

"We don't have to be glued together for every single moment, you know."

"I'm crushed... Wait! Maybe she means 'We'll have a billion opportunities to take pictures together over the course of our lives, so we can afford not to stand next to each other this one time'! Whaddya think, Taichi?!"

"As long as you keep up that unfailing optimism, I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Taichi, I want you standing next to me for sure. And Iori! Quit smirking at us from the sidelines, and get your ass over here!"

"Whoopsie! Sorry! Comin' right over!"

"Ugh, there's no way I can fit all of you kids in one shot. I'm just gonna take a bunch at random, and then you guys can make 'em into a photo album or something. Sorry if I miss anyone."

"Don't you dare miss anyone! This is the most important job of your life!"

"I think you might be exaggerating, Himeko..."

"Iori, hurry! Run, run, run!"

"Okay, here I am! I'm not too late, am I?!"

“For real, folks, here we go! Say cheese!”
With all my love and gratitude...



From the very bottom of my heart... thank you.

The End

Afterword

Thank you so, so much for reading *Kokoro Connect* all the way to the end. This is my last chance to speak to you all, and before we say goodbye, if it's not too much to ask, I'd like to use this opportunity to passionately thank all the people who have helped me.

To Shiromizakana-sama: Thank you so much for your wonderful illustrations. Your art is eye-catching and adorable and gorgeous, and without it, *Kokoro Connect* wouldn't exist — my story never would've made it this far. Thus, I consider you the co-parent of this series. I would sincerely love to have another opportunity to work with you.

To everyone who assisted in copy-editing, typesetting, design, and publishing: I'm so sorry I never had the chance to meet most of you. I'll always remember the hard work you put in to help make *Kokoro Connect* come to life. Thank you.

To all the bookstores and distributors directly responsible for getting my books to my readers: I think perhaps a book is not truly a *book* until someone reads it. Looking at it that way, you have truly given life to my printed ramblings. Thank you.

To everyone involved with the 11th Annual Enterbrain Entertainment Awards: It should go without saying, but without that award you gave me, *Kokoro Connect* would never have seen the light of day. Thank you so much for seeing the potential in my clumsy, imperfect writing and giving me this incredible opportunity.

To CUTEg-sensei, Na!-sensei, and everyone else involved in the manga adaptations: Thank you for creating a new iteration of *Kokoro Connect*. I imagine some parts were hard to translate into visual format, but your renditions really

caught me by surprise. In particular, I'd like to congratulate CUTEg-sensei on surviving that long-term serialization. Yui's adorable charm is easily the crown jewel of the manga adaptations.

To the voice actors: Thank you for giving so much of your time to all the drama CDs, anime episodes, and even the visual novel. You breathed new life into the characters of *Kokoro Connect*, giving them a sparkle they never would have had without you. Thanks to you, those characters will live forever in our hearts.

To the anime production staff: I was sincerely blown away when I learned just how many people worked on the anime adaptation of *Kokoro Connect*. Without a doubt, I can say this was the biggest project of my entire life. With an anime adaptation, my story reached far more people than a mere novel ever could... My characters and I couldn't possibly ask for more.

To the visual novel production staff: Seriously, I never imagined anyone would make a game about my books. It caught me completely off-guard, and of course, I was thrilled. It's a *long* game, too! I'm truly grateful for the developers' hard work. Thank you for adding new dimensions to *Kokoro Connect*.

To everyone else who worked on *Kokoro Connect* in some capacity: Sorry for lumping you all in together. Rest assured, I'm every bit as grateful to you, too. Regardless of how you contributed to the project, it means the world to me that you did, and I hope you all got something out of it in return.

To all the fans who wrote me letters: Thank you for all your love and encouragement. I know I haven't been able to reply to most of them, but I've read every single one, and I store them in a special place for safekeeping. Thank you for these lifelong treasures.

To my dear friends: I bet you just stopped to wonder "Am I one of his friends?" and you're CORRECT! Probably! Anyway, if it wasn't for you, I never would've made it this far. And I'm

not just saying that to be polite, either. Really. Be sure to buy the books, okay? Thanks!

To my family: I know you don't really comment on my work directly, but in my opinion, you have influenced my life far more than anything else. Thank you for silently supporting me while I chased my silly dreams.

To my future family: I wonder if my future kids will read *Kokoro Connect*... Honestly, it'd be kind of embarrassing, but it would still mean a lot to me, so I'll go ahead and thank you in advance. Without these books, I never would have met you.

To my editor: Without a doubt, you have worked harder on *Kokoro Connect* than anyone else. In the beginning, we were both a bit inexperienced, so I can't pretend I wasn't a little nervous. Plus, there were times when it felt like we weren't really communicating with each other very well. But I couldn't have written these books without you. I mean, you're the one who came up with the title "*Kokoro Connect*," so without you, there'd literally be no *Kokoro Connect*! Traveling down this path with you has helped me grow as a person, and I'll treasure these memories for the rest of my life. I'm so, so glad that you were my editor. I really couldn't have crafted this story without you.

To my readers: Thank you for following *Kokoro Connect* to the bitter end. Every single one of you helped this series and its characters make it from one volume to the next. I assure you, I don't fancy myself the sole arbiter of this story, one-sidedly bestowing it upon the people. You helped make *Kokoro Connect*. And if you love the end result, then you should really pat yourself on the back.

Now then, to all of you:

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for being a part of *Kokoro Connect*. We wouldn't have made it to this conclusion without every single one of you. Looking at it that way, it feels like destiny brought us together, and I'm grateful to my story for bringing you all into my life. I know I

can never repay most of these debts, but for now, here is where this story ends.

That said, I'm sure *our* story is far from over. And as I rest my pen, I pray that our future together is radiant.

See you again someday.

—Anda Sadanatsu
September 2013



Fujishima-san's
all dolled up for
her date!

Thanks for
everything!

Translator's Column

Hello, everyone! My name is Molly Lee, and I was the translator for *Kokoro Connect: Precious Time*. And all the other books in the series. At long last, it's finally over.

So, let's talk about the title.

As a refresher, "kokoro" means heart, but it can also mean mind or soul. Paired with "connect," it suggests a linking of hearts. This is the overarching theme for the entire series.

Then there's the subtitle for volume 11: Precious Time—

"Wait, what? Where's the Random?" I hear you asking. Well, you see, each side story anthology is demarcated with the naming convention of "[x] Time" instead. And to its credit, "Precious Time" is actually the most sensible title in the entire series! I can see what they're going for: the desire to cherish every last second together, because that time is running out. So in this case, I'm not quite as eager to propose a replacement title—but if I *had* to pick one, I think I'd suggest something like Treasured Moments. Same idea, just slightly different word choice that maybe gels better.

Over the past two years, dear reader, you and I have watched these kids grow up. Now it's the end of the final volume, and like a couple of middle-aged parents, we have to let them leave the nest. In my Translator's Column for the other two short story anthologies, I provided some story review and commentary; this is now my final Translator's Column, so I'd like to do that again, one last time.

The Rina Report is set three-fourths of the way through the CRC's second year, before volume 9 or thereabouts. It's a comedic opener that conveniently reintroduces the reader to the main cast through the lens of a side character—a story about a jealous little sister who doesn't quite know how to

cope with Taichi growing up and leaving the nest, or in other words, a reflection of the average *Kokoro Connect* reader's feelings at the start of the book. Alas, Rina never quite stops being a brat, but that's okay.

Couples' Battle Royale is easily the book's longest chapter. Set in the spring of the CRC's third year of high school, well after volume 10, this story pairs everyone up and makes them compete against each other in a random grab bag of challenges. Naturally, shipteasing ensues. Was I the only person who groaned when Iori was paired up with Katori? Either way, that ship gets sunk by the end of the book, the Fujishima/Watase ship is made canon, and the Chihiro/Shino ship... is lampshaded mercilessly while nothing concrete is stated. (I can live with that.) The story ends with no sign of the underdog victory Fujishima hoped for; instead, Iori wins due to author bias—I mean, uh, due to her talent at everything, apparently! Alright then! Honestly, Fujishima content is enough of a win for me.

In *Fly High, New Kid!*, Anda-sensei dumps us in the lap of a first-year we've never met to experience Yamaboshi High School through his cynical, socially anxious viewpoint. This story jumps back a few weeks before *Couples' Battle Royale* to show us the start of a brand-new school year. Although the previous story was longer, this is the one that drags the most in my opinion; the titular "new kid" isn't exactly compelling since he's so painfully bitter. But that's okay—the story isn't really about him, but rather the CRC kouhai having now risen to the position of senpai. And of course, if Anda-sensei was going to write about that, then he needed somebody to be *their* kouhai. Reading this story for the first time, I kept thinking "Just join! Just join! Just join!" And when he finally does, it's *such* a relief. Still, I wouldn't have minded if Anda-sensei had fleshed out the rest of the new recruits to the CRC, although I can understand he might not have wanted to waste time setting up names and backstories for characters he was never going to keep

writing about.

Lastly, *The Rest of Our Lives* is set in December, just a few short months away from graduation, and told from lori's point of view. Everybody else is busy studying for college entrance exams, but lori already got into college on recommendation, so she's just kind of There. You really get a feel for her loneliness as she watches all the other characters from the sidelines. That, more than her physical appearance, is what makes lori such a tragically beautiful character to me. I've always posited that lori is Anda-sensei's favorite, and I feel like it really shows here. Still, I'm glad he didn't shoehorn in any last-minute romance for her. Not everybody has to find their soulmate in high school, after all.

Before I go, I'd like to thank everyone at J-Novel Club, particularly my editor, Adam Fogle—you have been downright indispensable over these past two years, catching my term inconsistencies and misused idioms. *Kokoro Connect* was the first light novel series I ever worked on, and a part of it will always stay with me. And to the author, Anda Sadanatsu—I saw you made a website at andasadanatsu.com and I eagerly await your next update.

Editor's Row

I am Adam Fogle, editor of *Kokoro Connect: Precious Time*, and now editor of the entire *Kokoro Connect* novel series. Sometimes these novels seem like they'll go on forever, so to have one actually conclude gives a strange feeling. Very bittersweet. This is my first project, and the first to end, something I've spent over two years of my life working on. In that time, I've met a lot of people, learned so much about working on teams, grown in skill and confidence as a wordsmith...

...Delved into arcane secrets of grammar so exacting and so obscure that they must surely be the key to turning lead into gold, or something...

I've enjoyed working on this series. I've had a lot of ups and downs over the last few years, and while escapist fantasy is a nice way to take a break from everything, I think a story where people face hardships, struggle, and ultimately overcome them are more comforting in the long run, at least in some small way.

I know when a story is drawing me in because I'll always start imagining what I'd do in the character's places. Or at least, what I'd do in their situation, and how I'd survive it. I might even imagine talking to them about it, which is a big part of how I developed my skills at writing characters with distinct voices.

A good story, whether a book, a comic, a TV show, whatever, can take you places and expand your horizons. Well, everyone knows that much. But I'd add that it can only do that if you feel a connection with the characters. And incidentally, the best way to forge that connection is for them to make you laugh. Amusement, after all, is the easiest

positive emotion to draw out. Which may be why so many jerk characters are well liked, come to think of it.

Now, once more, for old times' sake, let's talk about one last character. Rina, the little sister. It's nice that she got to actually do something once or twice, instead of just being cute window dressing for Taichi. She's obviously a significantly younger character, but not too much younger. In fact, she's just old enough that she's just starting to grow up, so sometimes she engages the other characters with a slightly bratty precociousness. My read on her was that she tended to try to — How should I put it? — punch above her weight class, dialogue-wise. She wants to interact with the others as an equal, but hasn't nearly mastered the tools needed to do so yet. But she's working on it. I find that sort of character to be a lot more endearing than a pure saccharin cuteness.

So, that's that. For those who have read all the way to the end, thank you for supporting *Kokoro Connect*. I may be signing off here, but I have several other projects ongoing here at J-Novel Club, and I hope you'll happen upon and enjoy them too, as well as many others. Thank you to Molly Lee, our translator. You've done great work on this project, and I'd be happy to lend you my skills again some time. And finally, thanks and congratulations to the author, Anda Sadanatsu. That's a wrap, everyone.

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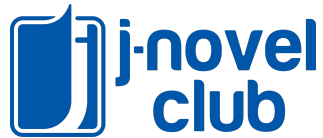
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by Sadanatsu Anda

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